

The following essay is included in the inaugural Spirited Debate essay collection, “White Evangelical Christians and Politics.” This collection includes competing perspectives from Ralph Reed, “God and Country: Effective Citizenship as a Christian Duty,” 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](#).

What’s God Got to Do with Renewing American Democracy?

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America is a riven society. Political divisions have always existed in America, but they [have been on the rise](#) for years. A poll in 2022 [showed](#) that polarization and extremism ranked among the three most important issues facing the country.

The gap between the Republican and Democratic parties [has only grown sharper](#) in Congress, while the share of Americans who interact with people from the other party [has plummeted](#). [Studies](#) tell us that “Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party’s members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines.”

Many Americans [only read news or get information](#) from sources that align with their political beliefs, which [exacerbates fundamental disagreements](#) about not just policies but about basic facts.

So-called “affective polarization”—a phenomenon in which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own—has [increased more dramatically in America than in any other democracy](#). Indeed, “[no established democracy in recent history has been as deeply polarized as the U.S.](#)” [Knowledgeable observers](#) have said “the nation is confronting the greatest strain to its fundamental cohesion since the Civil War.”

In [the words of the political and data analysts Geoffrey Skelley and Holly Fuong](#), “[H]atred—specifically, hatred of the other party—increasingly [defines our politics](#).”

Another version of this essay appeared as “Where Did Evangelicals Go Wrong?,” *The Atlantic*, March 3, 2024.

One might reasonably expect that Christians, including white evangelicals, would be a unifying, healing force in American society. After all, the apostle Paul wrote that Jesus came to tear down “[the dividing wall of hostility](#)” among groups that held profoundly different beliefs. Jesus famously said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.” In that same sermon Jesus said, “I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Even if those goals were unattainable, they were seen as aspirational.

Yet in the main, the white evangelical movement has for decades exacerbated our divisions, fueled hatreds and grievances, and often turned fellow citizens into enemies rather than friends. This isn’t true of all evangelicals, of course. It’s a movement that comprises tens of millions of Americans, many of them good and gracious people who seek to be peacemakers, including in the political realm. They are horrified by the political idolatry that we’re witnessing and the antipathy and rage that are emanating from it. But it is fair to say that movement that was at one time defined by its theological commitments is now largely defined by its partisan ones.

FOR MUCH OF the 20th century, evangelicals were disengaged from American politics, in part because of the humiliation of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, in which one of the nation’s most prominent evangelicals and politicians, William Jennings Bryan—a populist Democrat who ran for president three times—prosecuted the case against a high school teacher, John T. Scopes, who was charged with violating Tennessee state law for teaching evolution in schools. Bryan, who also testified, won the case but hurt his cause. (Scopes was found guilty, but the verdict was overturned on a technicality.) Outside of fundamentalist circles, Bryan and the movement he represented, which attacked the empirical findings of science, became the object of ridicule.

Another reason why fundamentalists and evangelicals kept their distance from politics was their theological precepts. Many churches and denominations stressed personal piety over social engagement. The world was irredeemably corrupt, they believed; the role of Christians was to save souls, not remake the world.

In 1965 a young Independent Baptist pastor, Jerry Falwell, was advocating that the church should be separate from the world. “We have few ties to this earth,” he said. The civic responsibilities of

Christians were therefore limited: obey the law, pay taxes, vote. But that was about it. “I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving Gospel of Jesus Christ and begin doing anything else,” Falwell said, “including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms.”

At the same time, some significant evangelical figures, like the theologian Carl F.H. Henry, were calling for cultural re-engagement. “While it is not the Christian’s task to correct social, moral and political conditions as his primary effort,” Henry said, “he ought to lend his endorsement to remedial efforts in any context not specifically anti-redemptive.”

In 1973, around 50 politically moderate-to-progressive evangelical leaders, including Henry, signed the “[Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern](#).” It was meant to address what they perceived as the gap between Christian faith and a commitment to social justice. Marjorie Hyer of *The Washington Post* [wrote at the time](#) that the gathering “could well change the face of both religion and politics in America.”

What happened instead is that the 1970s saw the rise of the Religious Right. It was a response to what conservative Christians considered to be a whole series of rapid, disorienting changes in social and moral norms. The 1960s had ushered in the feminist movement and the sexual revolution. There was Woodstock and the Stonewall Riots, the birth of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and a wave of campus uprisings.

In the 1970s a whole series of issues—from the Equal Rights Amendment to gay rights ordinances, from regulations on Christian schools to the IRS threatening to strip Bob Jones University of its tax-exempt status because of its policy against interracial dating, to the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 legalizing abortion¹—persuaded many evangelicals and fundamentalists that their values were being subverted, their way of life under assault. Political activism became a form of cultural resistance—and eventually, they hoped, a means to cultural victory.

¹ Mark Noll [points out](#) that “[t]he *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973, which later became a prime factor in stimulating the New Christian Right, was not at first a major evangelical concern. It was, instead, regarded as a Catholic issue.”

“The critical development in the mid-1970s was mobilization, and on a national scale,” [according](#) to the historian Mark Noll. “As that mobilization took place, it transformed well-established traditions of evangelical and fundamentalist religion into a political instrument.”

By the late 1970s Falwell, who a decade earlier had been advocating separatism, was embracing political activism. In addition to serving as pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church and chancellor of Liberty University, which he founded in 1971, Falwell was organizing “I Love America” rallies at state capitols. In 1979 he founded the Moral Majority, whose purpose was to mobilize conservative Christians against “secular humanism” and what he later called “[the flood tide of moral permissiveness](#).”

“We are fighting a holy war,” he said, “and this time we are going to win.” He was hardly alone. Falwell counted as allies pastors, televangelists and theologians; leaders of para-church organizations and “pro-family” ministries; Christian television networks (like *The 700 Club*) and radio shows with a massive reach (like Focus on the Family); and Christian political activists.

“The eruption of the Christian Right was sudden,” according to the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Frances Fitzgerald, author of *The Evangelicals: The Struggle To Shape America*. “[I]n 1980 they seemed to be everywhere, putting on huge conferences and mass rallies, and giving interviews on secular TV shows.”

“Low voter participation was an expression of a religious position,” A. James Reichley, author of *Religion and Political Realignment*, [said](#) in 1984. “But that changed dramatically in the early 1970s, to the point that the evangelicals now are among the highest participants in elections. Not all the first-time registrants are for Reagan and not all are being brought in by the churches. But the churches are having a substantial effect.”

Leading up to the 1980 election, evangelicals tended to be more Democratic than non-evangelicals. (Fifty-seven percent of evangelicals describe themselves as Democrats compared to 47 percent of non-evangelicals.) In 1976 Jimmy Carter split the evangelical vote against Gerald Ford. During the 1980 presidential election, however, Falwell pledged to mobilize voters for Ronald Reagan, “even if he has the devil running with him.”

Reagan defeated the incumbent president, Democrat Jimmy Carter, in a landslide, including winning around two-thirds of the evangelical vote. Four years later Reagan carried [almost three-quarters](#) of the evangelical vote. The mass migration of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians to the Republican Party was well under way. American politics was changing in profound ways; so, too, was the evangelical movement.

IN THE 1980S THE ANIMATING ISSUES for many evangelicals were ones that fell under the “biblical-family-moral” umbrella, [according](#) to the magazine Presidential Biblical Scoreboard.² But what was at least as significant as the issues that galvanized evangelicals and fundamentalists was the *temperament*, the cast of mind, that increasingly defined much of the evangelical, as well as the fundamentalist and Pentecostal, world.

The rhetoric was often apocalyptic, and it has been ever since. In 1980 Falwell said America was “floundering to the brink of death.” A year later D. James Kennedy, the pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and a leading-figure religious conservative, [told](#) 2,000 delegates at a joint meeting of National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals that evangelicals should increase their level of political involvement because “secular humanists have declared war on Christianity in this country and they are progressing very rapidly.”

In 1982 the theologian Francis Schaeffer, one of evangelicalism’s most important public intellectuals in the latter half of the 20th century, [gave a speech](#) in which he warned that America “is close to being lost.” He warned about “the Humanist conspiracy” and said that if public schools didn’t teach creation as well as evolution it amounted to “tyranny.” In [A Christian Manifesto](#), the book that emerged from his speech, Schaeffer warned about an “elite authoritarianism” that would

² In 1984 two church-related groups, Christian Voice and the Biblical News Service, published a “Biblical Scoreboard” to help voters select candidates for Congress and some state offices. [According to the New York Times](#), “The 40-page pamphlet lists as ‘pro-Biblical’ support for the project to place weapons in space, a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget, a constitutional amendment banning abortion, aid to ‘anti-Communist freedom fighters in Angola’ and the death penalty. The ‘pro-Biblical’ position also involves opposition to financing for family planning, paying female employees on the basis of ‘comparable worth,’ the proposed equal rights amendment and ‘giving homosexuals the same minority status as blacks and other minorities.’”

systematically destroy the Christian worldview. “It is not too strong to say that we are at war, and there are no neutral parties in this struggle,” Schaeffer said.

Year after year, decade after decade, the same themes were repeated.³ The narrative was America is always on the brink of moral collapse. The secular, progressive barbarians were always at the gates. The threat was existential and unending. This led to a zeitgeist of catastrophism.

This attitude catalyzed among evangelicals and fundamentalists an ambience of fear, the belief catastrophe was just around the corner, a sense that those who don’t share their views were out to destroy their country, their values, their children. For many evangelicals, politics became a contest between The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness. This turned politics into a zero-sum game; it created feelings of anger and rage towards their opponents, whom they saw less as their fellow citizens than as their enemies. For them, politics became drenched in grievances and demonization, almost always aimed at liberals and Democrats, especially Democratic presidents. Evangelical leaders set the tone.

One example: In 1994 Falwell sold a videotape that alleged that President Bill Clinton had ordered the murder of “countless people.” (The *Washington Post* reported that Falwell acknowledged in the broadcast on CNN that he had no independent evidence to corroborate the allegations. And none was ever found.)

The next Democratic president, Barack Obama, was accused of “paving the way for the future reign of the Antichrist,” in [the words](#) of Robert Jeffress, a significant figure in the evangelical world and pastor of one of the largest Southern Baptist churches in the country. Then-president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Paige Patterson, affirmed Jeffress’ claim. “I understand what Jeffress is saying,” [according to Patterson](#). This rhetoric was the coin of the realm.

³ Nearly three decades after the warning by Falwell, in 2009, James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family and an influential voice for Christian conservatives, [said](#), “Our nation is facing a crisis that threatens its very existence. We are in a moral decline of shocking dimensions.”

Worldviews have consequences, both good and bad. Just two days after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, Falwell and Pat Robertson—a Baptist minister and religious broadcaster, founder of the Christian Coalition and the Christian Broadcasting Network, and a Republican presidential candidate in 1988—had a conversation on Robertson’s television show *The 700 Club* in which Falwell said “What we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be miniscule, if in fact God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of God to give up probably what we deserve.” He added, “The ACLU’s [American Civil Liberties Union] got to take a lot of blame for this,” which Robertson agreed with. Falwell then went on to say this:

I know that I’ll hear from them for this. But, throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.”

To which Robertson responded, “Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government.”

This combination of factors—fear and borderline feelings of terror, a mindset of perpetual crisis, apocalyptic thinking, and frustration and fury toward perceived enemies—helped define the politics of evangelicalism and fundamentalism for three and a half decades. The intensity of the fear and apocalyptic thinking among evangelicals fluctuated during those three and a half decades. But it never fully waned.

Tim Alberta, author of [The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicalism in an Age of Extremism](#), [points out](#) that after the Cold War ends, during the 1990s, a decade of peace and prosperity, “some of that panic starts to fall away a little bit. . . . Things are at kind of a low simmer for a while.” But what starts to “trip the alarms inside of evangelicalism,” according to Alberta, is the end of the George W. Bush presidency and the election of Barack Obama. “We’re talking about a White evangelical movement, portions of which, perhaps significant portions of which, are deeply

uncomfortable with a Black president,” Alberta argues. In addition, he says, America witnessed a “major cultural movement toward the left,” particular in the area of gay rights and same-sex marriage.

All of this was happening prior to Donald Trump’s appearance on the political stage. But it went to a whole new level once he did, especially after he won the Republican nomination and the presidency in 2016. The Religious Right didn’t change so much as the person the Religious Right supported for president changed. He ushered in a whole new era.

THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN the Religious Right and Donald Trump—a non-religious, thrice-married man who celebrated his infidelities in the tabloids, paid hush money to a porn star, cheated on his taxes, spread conspiracy theories, mocked POWs and people with handicaps and was found liable for rape—seems incongruous, and in some ways it is. After all, for years evangelicals insisted good character was essential in political leaders, and especially in presidents. That was certainly the case when evangelicals lacerated Bill Clinton for his moral failures.

In 1998, for example, Gary Bauer, then president of the Family Research Council, a star of the Religious Right and a “family values” crusader, [said](#) this about Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky: “The seamy facts under public discussion are shameful enough. But fascination with this story should not be allowed to obscure the deeper lesson these incidents impart. That lesson is this: Character counts — in a people, in the institutions of our society, and in our national leadership. In character is destiny. Our founders believed and set down in their own words that only a virtuous people could remain free.” Bauer added, “[C]hildren cannot be set adrift into a culture that tells them that lying is okay, that fidelity is old-fashioned and that character doesn’t count.”

But once Trump won the Republican nomination in 2016, Bauer, like many other influential evangelical figures—including Franklin Graham, son of the famed preacher Billy Graham; Jerry Falwell Jr., who was president of Liberty University before he was ousted over a scandal; pastor Robert Jeffress; Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family; Tony Perkins, the Family Research Council’s longest-serving president; Wayne Grudem, a theologian and author; and many others—fell into line behind Trump. In doing so, they embraced a man whose personal, political, and business ethics are not only far

more compromised and corrupt than Bill Clinton's; they are unsurpassed in the history of the American presidency. For evangelical leaders and for those comprising the movement, character no longer counted.

“We kind of gave him—‘All right, you get a mulligan. You get a do-over here,’” Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and an ardent Trump supporter, [said in an interview](#).

In October 2016—several weeks after the release of the notorious “Access Hollywood” tape in which Trump bragged about his affairs and declared that when you’re a star, “You can do anything. You can grab them by the pussy. You can do anything”—more than seven in 10 white evangelical Protestants said an elected official can behave ethically even if they have committed transgressions in their personal life. Five years earlier, when Barack Obama was president, only 30 percent of white evangelical Protestants said the same. No group had shifted their position more dramatically than white evangelical Protestants.

The argument is commonly made that this was done for pragmatic reasons. Evangelicals might not admire Trump, it was said, but he would deliver on their policy agenda, and that mattered most. There was certainly some of that, but a good deal more was going on as well.

Calvin University historian Kristin Du Mez, author of [Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation](#), challenges the commonly held assumption that the Religious Right backed Trump only for pragmatic reasons. She argues that Trump represented the fulfillment, rather than the betrayal, of white evangelicals’ most deeply held values. Du Mez’s book offers an account of 75 years of evangelical history, showing how the evangelical subculture worked for decades to replace the Jesus of the gospels with an idol of rugged masculinity and Christian nationalism.

The support for Trump was “the culmination of evangelicals’ embrace of militant masculinity,” according to Du Mez. Trump was viewed as “their ultimate fighting machine.” This led to evangelicals condoning “the callous display of power.”

In [an interview in 2018 with the Guardian \(UK\) newspaper](#), Jerry Falwell Jr.—who referred to Trump as a “good moral person” -- described Democrats as fascists and “Brownshirts.” And Tony Perkins said evangelical Christians “were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there’s somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully.”

Ruth Graham and Charles Homans, reporters for the *New York Times*, wrote an article in 2024 in which they described the changing nature of evangelicalism. According to Graham and Homans, “Evangelicals are not exactly who they used to be. Being evangelical once suggested regular church attendance, a focus on salvation and conversion and strongly held views on specific issues such as abortion. Today, it is as often used to describe a cultural and political identity: one in which Christians are considered a persecuted minority, traditional institutions are viewed skeptically and Mr. Trump looms large.”

“Politics has become the master identity,” said Ryan Burge, an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University and a Baptist pastor. “Everything else lines up behind partisanship.”

The *Times* story ends with this telling anecdote:

At Mr. Trump’s rally in Coralville, it was Joel Tenney, a 27-year-old local evangelist who does not lead a church, who delivered the opening prayer.

The crowd responded tepidly to his impassioned recitation of several Bible verses. But the rallygoers roared to life when he set aside the Scripture and told them what they had come to hear.

“This election is part of a spiritual battle,” Mr. Tenney said. “When Donald Trump becomes the 47th president of the United States, there will be retribution against all those who have promoted evil in this country.”

White evangelical Protestants are among the [Republican Party’s most loyal constituencies](#), and this was certainly true in 2020. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), more than eight in 10 white evangelical Protestant voters who attend religious services frequently (85 percent) voted for Trump

in 2020; 81 percent of those who attend less frequently voted for him. Overall, Trump expanded his support among white evangelical Protestants from 2016, winning 84 percent of their vote in 2020 after receiving 77 percent four years earlier, when he ran against Hillary Clinton.

What this means is that white evangelical Christians are the most consistently reliable supporters of the most polarizing and morally depraved president in American history. It has hurt America; and it has done tremendous damage to the witness of the Christian faith.

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT BEGAN, at least in part, at least for some, as a defensive reaction to the aggressions of the modern world. It has ended up in a very different and troubling place. So how might those of us who are Christians, regardless of where we fall on the political spectrum, help redeem this moment? Most fundamentally, it will require a reshaping of sensibilities, a fundamental rethinking of the “how” of politics. Here are some goals to aspire to that could lead to a reframing of the Christian political identity.⁴

Reclaiming the Real Jesus

Christians need to reacquaint themselves with the Jesus of the New Testament, not the Jesus of American Right (or Left). The real Jesus demonstrated a profound mistrust of political power and did not encourage his disciples to become involved in political movements of any kind.

The most meaningful emblem of Christianity is not the sword but the cross, which is the antithesis of world power. Unlike Muhammed, Jesus made it clear time and again that his kingdom is not of this world. And the New Testament does not provide anything like a governing blueprint.

The early church did not hand out voter guides. What it *did* do, according to the sociologist Rodney Stark, is create “communal compassion” and social networks; care for the sick, widows, and orphans; welcome strangers and care for outsiders; respect women; and connect to non-Christians.

⁴ [The After Party: Toward Better Christian Politics](#), a group led by David French, Russell Moore and Curtis Chang, provides what it describes as a course that “challenges Christians to move from the ‘what’ of ideology to the ‘how’ of biblical virtue, adopting the posture of a disciple, with Jesus as our Teacher.”

That is how a tiny and obscure messianic movement in the second and third centuries became the dominant faith of Western civilization. That is how it transformed the ancient world and the course of human history.

This does not mean that Christians, Christian institutions, and churches should never under any circumstances be involved in politics, since politics has profound human consequences. It is one arena in which to pursue justice, which matters. What it *does* mean is that Christians need to take on a much different posture than many of them presently have, to move away from hyper-partisanship toward a more detached and prophetic role, and to take more seriously than many do the idea of dual citizenship—the belief that they are citizens of the City of Man but that their deepest loyalties are to the City of God. This ought to create some safe distance from the principalities and powers of this world. But pastors and other leaders in the church need to be intentional about teaching this.

A proper political theology would prevent Christians, Christian institutions, and churches from becoming pawns in political power games. That may sound so obvious as to be banal, but evangelical Christians in particular—not all, but many—have been as susceptible to manipulation as any group involved in politics.

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state,” Martin Luther King Jr. said. “It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.” Today, far too many evangelical Christians—however admirable they may otherwise be and despite the many good works they may do—are tools of a dangerous movement and have been tools of a dangerous former president.

Articulate a Coherent Vision

Evangelicals need to develop a theory of political and social engagement that is far more comprehensive and careful, mature and informed, textured and sophisticated. In this respect, evangelicals and Protestants have much to learn from Catholics, who have laid out and built on principles of social teaching over many centuries. The cornerstones of Catholic social thought are human dignity; subsidiarity, which holds that nothing should be done by larger and more complex institutions that can be done as well by smaller and simpler ones; and solidarity, meaning the social

obligations we have to one another, with a special concern for the poor and most vulnerable members of the human community.⁵

As Michael Gerson [put it](#) when describing Catholic social thought, “The doctrinal whole that requires a broad, consistent view of justice, which—when it is faithfully applied—cuts across the categories and clichés of American politics. Of course, American Catholics routinely ignore Catholic social thought. But at least they have it. Evangelicals lack a similar tradition of their own to disregard.”

Until some similar approach begins to take hold—and is transmitted from theologians and church leaders to the wider community of believers—the random, *ad hoc* nature of evangelical political involvement will continue and probably worsen. There is no authoritative theological construct in place to check, channel, and refine raw partisanship cloaked in Christian garb.

Model a Deep Attitudinal Shift, Biased Toward Unity

A third thing that needs to happen is a deep attitudinal shift among many politically active Christians—to move away from a spirit of anger toward understanding, from revenge toward reconciliation, from grievance toward gratitude, and from fear toward trust.

Ken Stern is a fair-minded liberal who spent a year with people on the right to better understand their worldview. (His book, [Republican Like Me: How I Left the Liberal Bubble and Learned to Love the Right](#), documents his journey.) Stern visited evangelicals in a variety of settings and was impressed by the generosity he encountered. The pastor of the church I attend and I met with him for lunch a few years ago. Here are the questions Stern posed to us: Why, since many evangelicals live lives devoted to helping others, does that not translate into a political agenda that reflects that fact? How is it that the “culture war” issues succeed in becoming the public face of Christianity, while the many acts of kindness and charity, and the spirit informing those things, are kept under a

⁵ Many of us who are non-Catholic but have had great respect for the teachings of the Catholic Church have been shaken to our core by the sickening and shameful sexual abuse scandals, by the Church’s efforts at cover-ups, and by the failure to prevent further abuse.

bushel, largely out of public view? Why consistently show your worst side rather than your most winsome one, he asked.

We wondered the same thing.

It's been said that C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien never lost their wonder and enchantment with the world. It's an unfortunate commentary on the state of things that the same can be said of so few public, and certainly so few politically active, evangelicals.

In his book What's So Amazing About Grace?, Philip Yancey tells of how prior to writing his book he began asking a question of strangers when striking up a conversation. "When I say the words 'evangelical Christian' what comes to mind?"

Yancey wrote that he mostly heard *political* descriptions—and not once did he hear a description redolent of grace.

Yancey adds this:

Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people. I think back to who I was—resentful, wound tight with anger, a single hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned from family and church. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace.

I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness or goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. I yearn for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace.

It is that "culture of grace" that can transform people's hearts, and in the process renew not just the church but also American society and American politics.

Become Loving Neighbors

The fourth thing Christians can do to strengthen their public witness and the state of our politics is to internalize and act on the lessons from an ancient parable, that of the Good Samaritan, which speaks to this moment in a powerful way.

The context of the story is that Jesus, who declared that we should love our neighbor, is asked, “Who is our neighbor?” The parable, found in the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, is Jesus’s response.

In the story, a Samaritan comes across a Jew who has been beaten, robbed and left dying on the side of a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. After a priest and Levite both ignore the wounded man, the Samaritan rescues him and, at his own expense, nurses him back to health. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus says.

What makes this parable so extraordinary and so relevant to us is that there was deep enmity between Samaritans and Jews at the time; they despised each other. They had practically no dealings with each other. It was the first-century version of political, ethnic, and religious tribalism, with the Samaritans in particular marginalized, oppressed, and viewed with suspicion.

The point Jesus was driving home is that we need to break down the walls between us. We are called to love our “neighbors,” which, according to the parable, are those who are racially, religiously, ethnically, and culturally different than we are, and to help them in their need in the most practical way, materially and physically.

All of this has obvious lessons for the here and now. As we’ve already established, our politics is polarized and tribalized. Many Americans view “the Other”—for some, these are refugees, Muslims, and Mexicans; for others, it’s rural southerners, gun owners, and religious fundamentalists—with suspicion and contempt. That combination of suspicion and contempt is eating away at our sense of national unity.

Christians can model what it means to reach across the divides that exist in their work settings, in their churches, in their social circles, and in what they say on social media. They can demonstrate tolerance and understanding toward those with different life experiences. They can be intentional about putting themselves in volunteer settings that put them in contact with people who have different political views, skin color, national origins, and class status.

There's no magic wand we can wave to repair the breach. A nation's civic and political culture is changed by what we do in our daily lives, in our homes, schools, communities, and houses of worship. And by loving our neighbors we take the most important first step. That is what Jesus calls his followers to do, and what citizenship in 21st-century America demands.

A LITTLE MORE THAN A DECADE AGO my friend Steve Hayner mentioned to me that he was going through the Gospel of Luke and was struck again and again with the grace and embrace Jesus extended to those whom the religious elite had every reason (they thought) to kick to the curb. People on the low runs of life, including those with frailties and flaws, flocked to Jesus—not because he preached moral rectitude but because he was willing to love them, to listen to them, and to welcome them.

“I'm sure that many were self-justifying and hardened in their life patterns,” Steve wrote me. But Jesus's main mission was to convince them of God's love and invitation. And then he went on to speak about those willing to stand in the idle of the tensions that necessarily attach to faithful living in a broken world.

“I doubt whether God will have much to say about our political convictions in the end,” Steve said to me. “But I'm quite sure that he will have something to say about how we loved the least, the marginalized, the outcasts, the lonely, the abused—even when some think that they have it all. Political convictions that lead toward redemption and reconciliation are most likely headed in the right direction.”

This isn't a prescription for a particular kind of political involvement. It's certainly not a road map for how to deal with complicated public issues. It is, however, a reflection of *how* Christians should engage the world, including the political world.

A successful political-social movement will require Christians to make a compelling case for social order and moral excellence, but to do so with a generosity of spirit, all the while offering a healing touch, especially to those who are suffering and living in the shadows of society.

History has shown that politics can be a more noble enterprise when it is twinned with faith, but only faith properly understood and properly executed. Such a faith would be guided by the wisdom expressed by the Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton: “A theology that ends in lovelessness cannot be Christian.”

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