



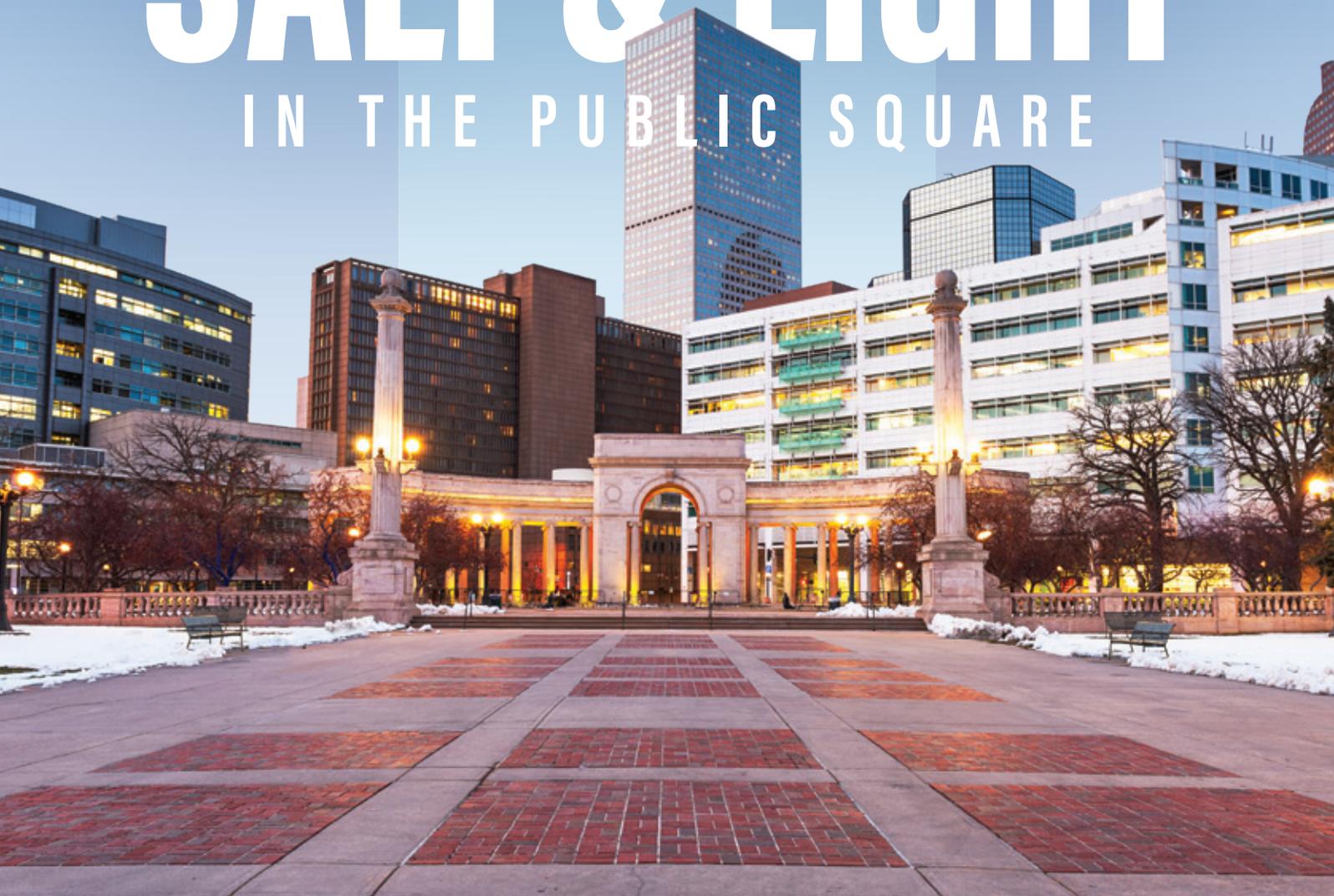
Summer 2022
Volume 8, Issue 1

LIGHT

KINGDOM • CULTURE • MISSION

SALT & LIGHT

IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE



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How We Carry Out Our Mission

Looking out my window sits downtown Nashville. Music City, with its dozens of new high-rise buildings going in, should probably be referred to as Crane City. When settlers first came to this region, I doubt they could have envisioned what this city has become. The first Europeans arrived here in the early 1700s and established a settlement called “French Lick.” Even before that period, the area was an important hunting ground for Native American tribes due to the large game that would beat a path to the area. Why? Because of the natural “salt licks” found here.

That isn’t necessarily unique to Nashville. History is replete with examples of animals beating a path to salt-heavy areas and humans following closely behind. Salt is just naturally an attractive element. In fact, it has a number of qualities that are helpful and that is likely why Jesus pointed to it in his ministry.

As he was teaching upon a mountainside, Jesus gave a clear instruction: “You are to be the salt of the earth . . . (and) the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14). The command here, and the biblical wisdom it reveals, guides all seasons of a Christian’s life, including election season.

Throughout the pages of this edition of *Light* magazine, we feature a talented collection of Christian thinkers and leaders who explore how being salt and light informs their work, engagement in the public square, and public service. The takeaway from each piece reveals the profound ways Jesus’ command centering on two basic elements—salt and light—continues to affect how Christians operate in the public square.

In addition, our work at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is grounded in

Scripture passages like Matthew 5 and guided by the Baptist Faith and Message (as well as informed by the resolutions passed at each year’s annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention). Jesus’ direction here, coupled with the first line of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 Article 15—which states “All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society”—offer guidance for the missional work we have been called to in the public square.

Moreover, these principles are reflected in the very mission statement established by Southern Baptists for the ERLC. We are to “apply Christian principles to moral and social problems and questions of public policy.” So, undoubtedly, this entity is called to be a convictional and engaging actor on behalf of the SBC in the public square.

It is only fitting that, as another election is nearing, we would dedicate these pages to examining some of what it means to be salt and light in this context. As we do this, let us do so as ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), with an understanding that what we are advocating for is an agenda that is not our own and will not fit neatly within the political parameters governing partisan activists.

But, that’s OK. Salt necessarily creates thirst. My prayer is that as you read these articles, it will cause you to create an unquenchable thirst in those around you for the Living Water (John 4:10) that comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.



BRENT LEATHERWOOD
ACTING PRESIDENT, ERLC



WHAT WE ARE
ADVOCATING FOR IS
AN AGENDA THAT IS
NOT OUR OWN AND
WILL NOT FIT NEATLY
WITHIN THE POLITICAL
PARAMETERS GOVERNING
PARTISAN ACTIVISTS.

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LIGHT

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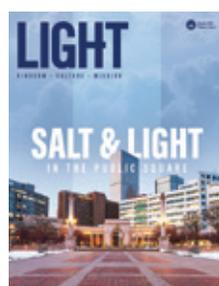
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A Christian's Participation in the Public Square is Essential

I confess that I find politics exhausting and discouraging in our current societal climate. Important differences can't be debated without vilification and the worst kind of assumptions. People on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum don't treat one another with respect, recognizing the inherent dignity in their opponents. And worse yet, Christians are some of the chief offenders. Far from salt and light, we often come off more like vinegar and cast unhelpful shadows, both of which can tempt me toward a hands-off approach.

But withdrawal is not the right course of action. That's because government—however fallen—is a gift from God (Romans 13). And Christian participation in the public square is essential. Not everyone will be gifted or called to be involved in the same way, but we all have a role to play as salt and light in our nation's governance. We may be compelled to serve in public office, passionate about legislating policy matters, or just eager to cast a wise vote during our local, state, and national elections. Regardless of the degree of participation, individual Christians, through their distinct difference from the nonbeliever made possible by the Spirit, should serve as a preservative in our culture and a light that illuminates the goodness of God's ways and character.

Our latest issue of *Light* magazine serves as a measure of encouragement and a reminder of our call as Christians to seek the welfare and flourishing of those around us through the way we live, speak, and advocate. Authors like Katie Frugé and Josh Wester discuss how Scripture compels us to seek our neighbors' good through involvement in the public square. Gov. Bill Lee of Tennessee, D.J. Jordan, and Alex Harris share wisdom about a Christian's character in public service based on their experiences. And members of the ERLC's staff provide a look at the various ways we advocate on behalf of Southern Baptists in accordance with God's Word.

I would encourage you to evaluate your own heart as you read this edition of *Light* magazine. Have you contributed to the vitriol we witness online? Do you regularly make assumptions about those you only interact with as an avatar? Are you apathetic to the idea that anything good can come from the public square?

Politics isn't everything, but it is something. It is not our hope as believers, but it is a tool God uses to allow us to serve our neighbors and to cultivate an environment where the gospel can freely go forth. Ultimately, Jesus—and the hope of the gospel—is the reason we go through the pains of participating in the public square. Only he can bring us the peace and satisfaction we often look for in the public square. And only he can usher in a kingdom that cannot be shaken or stained by sin.

Lindsay Nicolet

LINDSAY NICOLET

MANAGING EDITOR, *LIGHT* MAGAZINE



INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS SHOULD SERVE AS A PRESERVATIVE IN OUR CULTURE AND A LIGHT THAT ILLUMINATES THE GOODNESS OF GOD'S WAYS AND CHARACTER.

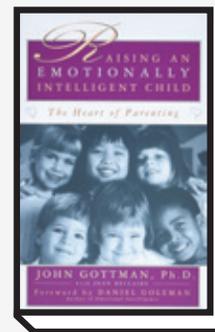
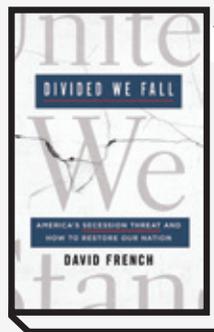
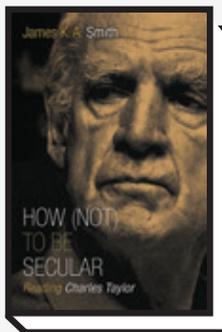
Books

1 How (Not) to Be Secular

by JAMES K.A. SMITH

Given the rise of secularism and how easily this terminology is thrown about in conversations today, Christians need to think deeply about what it actually is and how our society has shifted so quickly on what it means to be human, the nature of sexuality, and other pressing social and ethical issues. Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor is one of the intellectual giants of our day, but often his works are incredibly dense and inaccessible to the average reader. This volume by philosopher James K.A. Smith outlines and helps readers understand the work of Taylor without overwhelming them. Smith helps readers navigate competing definitions of secular, explore ideas such as the social imaginary, and see how the public square has become so highly contested but not devoid of transcendent moral and social language, even if faith is rejected by many in the social order.

—JASON THACKER



2 Divided We Fall

by DAVID FRENCH

Is it possible the United States of America could divide into two or even three countries in the near future? In his book *Divided We Fall*, David French provides riveting—even persuasive—narratives of how such scenarios could happen, but he also proposes a solution to the country's polarization that might prevent such secessions. He addresses “how the combination of geographic sorting, group polarization, and individual intolerance” is dividing Americans in ways that most threaten unity. French suggests answers to the division, recommending Americans adopt pluralism, a correct understanding of tolerance, and courage. He also encourages the practice of the virtues of Micah 6:8: “to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.”

He closes with hope but also warns that Americans “cannot simply presume our national unity will last.” If you are troubled by America's polarization and desire to be an agent of change, I would recommend that you pick up French's book.

—TOM STRODE

3 Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child

by JOHN GOTTMAN

The changes my three children experienced the last two years produced an entire spectrum of feelings. Although each child expresses himself differently, it became clear that we all needed help in navigating the emotional landscape of our home. Originally released in 1997, Dr. John Gottman's parenting classic, *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, was recommended by a number of friends and counselors. Gottman's work is based on 20 years of research and full of practical advice to help parents walk their children through emotional moments. He helps parents create space for their children's negative emotions and understand the opportunity for intimacy found within these moments. I appreciated that Gottman did this while retaining boundaries and consequences that are necessary for childrearing. The God-honoring goal of self-control remains relevant for every member of the family, and I believe that helping our children cultivate this virtue is a gift that will serve them in every area of their lives for years to come. Gottman's book will equip you to do this well.

—JILL WAGGONER

How Do We Enter a Secular Public Square?

A REVIEW OF RECENT MODELS FOR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Alex Ward

In 2021, the share of adults who belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque dropped below 50% for the first time in recent history.¹ Those who would formally identify with a religion were no longer the majority, at least according to polls. At the same time, the share of those who were identifying as “nones” (a category that includes atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particular), was growing at a rapid rate, with as much as 40% of Generation Z and increasing levels in all age groups.²

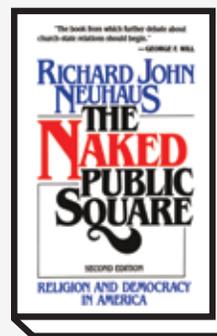
However, this did not mean that religion was disappearing, but rather being transformed. As religious scholar Tara Isabella Burton has noted in her study of secular religious practice, the devotion that used to be given to formal religion was now placed on new trends such as health and wellness culture or sexual libertinism.³ We could also add political affiliation, as polls now show that significant numbers of individuals would be more unhappy if their child married a person of a different political party rather than a different faith.⁴

In the face of this new religious landscape, it can be helpful to consider the ways that Christians in recent years have thought about political engagement. It would take too long to explore every framework offered by Christians throughout history for how to engage the world. The classic models like Augustine’s Two Cities (which features prominently in Josh Wester’s article on faith and secularism), Luther’s Two Kingdoms, or Kuyper’s

concept of Sphere Sovereignty are all incredibly helpful and worthy of attention, yet they also all operated in a world where religious faith was central to public life. That is less the case in recent years. Thus, it is helpful to consider other recent examples of what it means to engage this new secularized public square.

RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS

For this task, there is no more classic work than Richard John Neuhaus’ *The Naked Public Square*. Writing in the heyday of the Religious Right, Neuhaus seeks to correct the notion brought



A CHOICE TO EXCLUDE RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS IS A THUMB ON THE SCALE OF THE BOUNDS OF DISCOURSE.

forward by those who would limit religion’s influence in the public arena. Rejecting the value-laden arguments of religion, these proponents of secularism want not a neutral public square, which might be commendable, but rather a

neutered public square where religion has no place.

Neuhaus' response is not to say that religion can be neutral, but rather to refute that the public square can ever truly be naked. A choice to exclude religious arguments is a thumb on the scale of the bounds of discourse, and this is a departure from the traditional understanding of religion's role in democracy. His classic work, which is structured more as a series of essays with recurring themes, helps to highlight the inherent reality that in matters of such intense debate, there is no such thing as neutrality.

STANLEY HAUERWAS AND WILLIAM WILLIMON

Writing at the end of the 1980s, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon offered their own response to the changing culture around them and the public-facing Christian political activity. They argue that the church is a colony in a foreign culture. It functions as a beachhead for the coming kingdom, and it is the

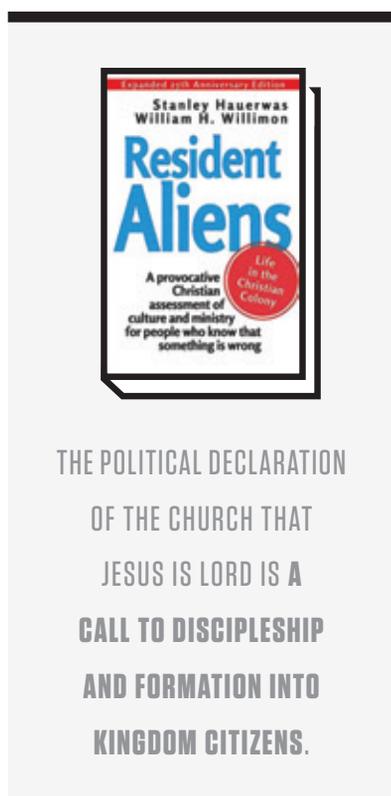
place where deep discipleship occurs. If Neuhaus' work focused on the realm of wider culture as the site of public engagement, Hauerwas and Willimon locate the place of preeminence in the gathered assembly of the believers.

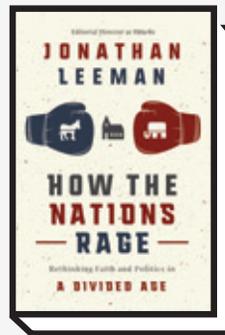
The Anabaptist tendencies of the work incline it to be critical of political engagement like that of Falwell's Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition. And yet it does see a need for engaging the rapidly changing public square. However, rather than beginning with mobilization and legislation, the authors begin with spiritual formation. The political declaration of the church that "Jesus is Lord" is a call to discipleship and formation into kingdom citizens, which means that the church as the church is a political entity when it is inculcating the virtues of Christ through its liturgy and spiritual practices. The church is the locus of political activity for the Christian, not the town square.

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Writing decades later, Baptist political theologian Jonathan Leeman offers a synthesis of the best contributions from works such as Neuhaus, Hauerwas, and Willimon in a decidedly evangelical framework. Where all three agree is that the culture has rapidly secularized and that the public square is no longer as hospitable to Christianity as it once was. Leeman, like Neuhaus, rejects the concept of a neutral public square. His *How the Nations Rage* recognizes that the contests in the public square are between competing gods, not matters of unimportance. Like David before Goliath, or between Elisha and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, this is a contest to see which god will win. To pretend that we are disinterested participants and not warriors for our God is an inaccurate representation of what is occurring when we engage others.

At the same time, Leeman does not go so far as to say that the Christian's political activity is grounded in legislation passed or court cases decided. It is a decidedly





LEEMAN REMINDS CHRISTIANS
THAT AS AMBASSADORS
OF THE KINGDOM WE ARE
ALWAYS REPRESENTING
AND ADVANCING THE
WORK OF THE KING.

Baptistic framework grounded in the local church, a point at which Hauerwas and Willimon would agree. The local church, when rightly forming disciples, will be creating those who are able to do the work of articulating the truth of the gospel and its moral demands in the public square.

While Leeman would disagree with some of the proposals offered by Hauerwas and Willimon, his framework does agree that the church's ecclesiological work is also its political work. But it approaches this from a decidedly evangelical perspective which sees a primary part of that work as evangelism and regeneration of hearts. As such, it provides a helpful model for evangelicals seeking to bridge the teaching they experience on Sunday with their life in the public square on Monday through Saturday.

The major point at which Leeman's book helps for understanding the cultural moment and how Christians should engage is his approach of interacting with opposing worldviews. Leeman recognizes

that neutrality is a myth, and that the public square was never naked. Every time we enter, we do so on behalf of our gods, whether that is the God of Scripture or the god of personal autonomy or sexual liberation. In a secular moment where there is a profusion of religion, even if organized religion is declining, Leeman reminds Christians that as ambassadors of the kingdom we are always representing and advancing the work of the King. While that language may seem oppositional (it is), and may strike some as too pugilistic (in the line of culture wars mentality), it does capture the truth that the public square is a battleground of ideas and ideologies.

Though evangelical Christians recognize that the ultimate battle has been fought and that the rulers of this world are living on borrowed time, that does not diminish the reality that we are actively engaged in combat not against flesh and blood but against powers, authorities, and spiritual darkness (Eph. 6:12).

All three of these models offer the church something useful, whether a recognition of the reality of a public square that is never naked, the formational power of the church, or the battle for the public square. Christians should not see in them oppositional models, but rather pieces of the larger project of what it looks like to interact with this new religious landscape. Luckily, the model for engaging secularism is the same as it was for engaging paganism: offer the truth of the gospel to those deceived by sin and provide discipleship and formation for those in the local church. Secularism may be a new moment for the American church, but the task remains the same. ★

Alex Ward serves as lead researcher for the ERLC.

1 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

2 <https://religioninpublic.blog/2021/07/19/generation-z-and-religion-the-most-recent-data/>

3 Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2020).

4 <https://research.lifeway.com/2019/03/07/differing-politics-more-than-religion-raises-issues-for-potential-marriages/>



Photo provided by the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee

Avoiding the Fear Factor

A BETTER WAY FOR CHRISTIANS TO OPERATE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Brent Leatherwood

Most political operatives worth their salt will tell you, in just about any recent election, the number one motivating factor for voters is fear. Usually, this manifests itself in proclamations that the opposition (usually called “our enemies”) want to take away something from you: a right, a deeply held value, a cultural icon. And we

are told that the only proper response is to elect “a fighter.”

Conveniently, the campaign talking to you at that given moment has the candidate who should be your preferred combatant. The candidates themselves will often play into this hype machine by telling everyone they can that “this is the most important election of our lifetime”

or “we’re the last line of defense before our nation is forever changed.” Voters are left in a state of hyper-motivation for what they have now been conditioned to believe is an existential war.

Here’s the problem: We like it. Great campaigns make voters feel as though they’re part of a movement. Something more than just themselves. But in this

social media era, where all of us are made to feel part of a performance—in order to get likes, retweets, and shares—we are not content to just cast a vote. We want a role to play in the battle, and so we do our part on behalf of our preferred candidate by flaming, dragging, or canceling our opponents online.

All of this should cause reflection for Christians. I know a good number of Christians who may not agree with the tactics, but do agree with the purposes. Unfortunately, there's not much basis in Scripture for an ends-justify-the-means application of Christian ethics to voting (or any activity for that matter). But we have to understand that, in many ways, we are, as well as our neighbors, being manipulated by very sophisticated, technologically-savvy campaigns.

Instead of aligning with the hope we have in a risen King, these efforts are actually causing us to look elsewhere for help. Tempting us to, at least temporarily for the purposes of an election, place our faith in an earthly prince who will fight for whatever policy preference we might have.

HOW CHRISTIANS CAN THINK ABOUT ELECTION SEASON

So what is an appropriate way to process all that is thrown our way in an election season? Others may take a different approach but, as a Christian who is a Southern Baptist, I would start here:

First, in Matthew 5, Jesus is sitting with his disciples, surrounded by a throng of interested onlookers, and he issues this charge: "You are to be the salt of the earth . . . (and) the light of the world." Salt was—and still is—a valuable element at the time for any number of reasons, including its attractive qualities.

It not only enhances the taste of food but it also literally draws water to it (think of when your salt shaker gets clumpy in humid temperatures). I believe Jesus had this aspect in mind when discussing this. He wants his followers to be unique in a fallen world in order to pique the curiosity of those around us so that a

and other areas of our life (a point that Josh Wester highlights in his article for this issue). But I think, deep down, we know that's incorrect. The gospel should inform all aspects of our lives, even the candidates we support and what we do at the ballot box. Some will read that and say that's too basic and a dodge from

real life scenarios that have and will continue to play out in elections.

But, I think the power of the gospel is its simplicity (1 Cor. 1:18-31). This simple message of Christ's resurrection has the power to transform lives and structure our political witness. When we declare that "Jesus is Lord," we are acknowledging that neither political party is. Our political activity is demonstrated through the fulfillment of the Great Commission's ("Go and make disciples") recognition of Jesus' authority and the Great Commands' ("Love God and love neighbor") imperative to promote true human flourishing.

Christians entering the public square do the most politically powerful thing they can when they remember that politics is not ultimate, because we serve a King whose kingdom is coming and where all things will be made right. We don't withdraw, but we also don't twist our souls in service to temporary political realities. It is in our witnessing to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and all the moral implications of that moment in history for our life that we exercise our true political power. ★

Brent Leatherwood is the acting president of the ERLC.

1 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/baptist-faith-and-message-article-15-the-christian-and-the-social-order/>

IT IS IN OUR WITNESSING TO THE DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AND ALL THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THAT MOMENT IN HISTORY FOR OUR LIFE THAT WE EXERCISE OUR TRUE POLITICAL POWER.

channel can be created for the Living Water (John 7) to flow.

Much is the same for being a light. Ships need beacons in order to navigate in the dark. What better illustration could there be for helping those around us see not us, but the reason for the hope inside of us (1 Pet. 3:15).

Finally, I would submit that Article 15 of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 outlines some helpful guidance for us navigating this space. Our convention specifically envisions Christians working for the good of the social order. A predecessor of mine stated it this way: "Believers in union with Christ will share His priorities."¹ That's something we all should affirm. Far too often, the reality is, we try to compartmentalize our political views away from the gospel



Be Surgeons, Not Butchers

HOW WE SHARE TRUTH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE MATTERS

Jon Kelly

Every follower of Christ is called to be salt and light in this world (Matt. 5:13-16). God has placed us in the midst of broken places that desperately need the gospel of Jesus Christ and the truth of his Word. How are Christians to flesh this out in a public square that is often filled with toxicity, combativeness, division, and evil? As a pastor, I want to offer you a few thoughts to consider as you seek to glorify God and influence the culture in which he has placed you.

THE WORD OF GOD GUIDES US

The Word of God in its entirety (not just cherry-picked sections) is what should govern us and guide all that we do as believers. It is the filter by which we process all things in the public square. It is a “lamp unto our feet and light unto our path” (Ps.119:105). What we stand for or do not stand for, how we treat our neighbor, what we feel is valuable, and our understanding of how life should be is directly connected to the Word of God.

We are kingdom citizens who operate on earth as ambassadors under the guidance, orders, and reflection of King Jesus. We are not only witnesses and representatives of Christ, but also of all that his heavenly kingdom entails. Virtually every aspect of our life and witness in the world should reflect this. When we lose sight of our mission in the public square, our motivations become carnal, self-seeking, short-sighted, and lacking the power of the Holy Spirit (James 3:13-15). It is too easy to be disciplined by our favorite news networks and organizations. The result is that we speak their talking points and agendas instead of the Word of God. Be careful of this.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS MEANS DESIRING THEIR BEST

It is amazing to see the extent to which Paul tolerated the weaknesses of those around him. There is also much to be learned in observing how much he was willing to endure from those who often attacked him. He says to those in Corinth

who have been attacking his authority and credibility, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor.12:15).

How can Paul say such a thing to those who are hurting him and opposing him? One word: love. What we find is that Paul genuinely desires their best, even at his own expense. He sincerely loves them. Paul is not motivated by the desire to win an argument or to prove that he’s right in conflict. He’s compelled by a genuine love for people and a desire for their best in Christ.

Being salt and light in the public square is more than only sharing the gospel; it also encompasses our motivations for sharing the gospel. *Why* we communicate matters just as much as *what* we communicate.

Many of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day were known for their love for the law, but not for their love for their neighbor. Paul, schooled in the law, emphasizes the necessity of love: “If I . . . understand all mysteries and knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Paul concluded that if love isn’t the motivation and anchor, then we’ve missed the point.

If we are truly honest, it's extremely difficult to conclude in our society that many Christ-followers are sincerely motivated by love for people. It appears that like the Pharisees, we are more motivated by a love for truth. It only takes a few minutes of scrolling through most social media comment sections to see that we are more motivated by a desire to be right and win an argument than we are motivated by a genuine love for the image-bearer in front of us. It is a sad reality that we often mock, humiliate, and sarcastically criticize those we disagree with.

Yet, it doesn't have to be that way. We do not have to choose between one or the other. We are called to love God, to love his Word, to love his ways, and to also love our neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40). Love has a deep concern for truth and the imparting of grace (John 1:14). Even in our correction of others, our hope and desired outcome should be to see repentance and alignment with Christ in those we speak truth to.

HOW YOU COMMUNICATE MATTERS JUST AS MUCH AS WHAT YOU COMMUNICATE

If there are any words of wisdom that I can give you from my personal experiences of failure, as you seek to communicate the hard truth to those in Christ or those who do not know Christ, it is this: "Be surgeons, not butchers." Both butchers and surgeons use sharp knives and objects to cut, yet they both cut in different manners, with contrasting goals in mind.

Life is not the desired outcome of the butcher's blade. There is no gentleness or concern for the object being cut. Surgeons, on the other hand, cut with great care and gentleness because their goal is to heal and not kill. Surgeons cut as is necessary for what is helpful to preserve life.

The surgeon's cuts may hurt and lead to months of recovery for the individual experiencing the surgery, but people are willing to lay on the operating table and be cut because they know that the surgeon wants to see them healed. No one desires to lay down on a butcher's table.

We often forget that the way in which we communicate truth either validates or diminishes the gospel message that we preach. For example, parents who regularly yell at their children and are harsh with them, give them a distorted view of God and the gospel. You can't be a butcher and a faithful witness for Christ at the same time. Our goal should not be to correct harshly, but to exhort with humility as those who lean on God's grace ourselves.

Paul says, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Col.4:6). Jesus also gives us a warning by saying, "I tell you, on the

WE ARE ALWAYS IN THE
LORD'S PRESENCE, AND WE
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A HUMBLE POSTURE.

day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak . . ." (Matt. 12:36). It is wise to remember that we are always in the Lord's presence, and we should communicate from a humble posture.

WE ARE CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM

In John 17, Jesus spends a significant amount of time praying that his followers would be one and united. The problem with being a spiritual butcher is that butchers naturally cause unnecessary divisions and lack the tenderness required to bring healing in environments of pain and conflict.

Being a kingdom citizen, on the other hand, means that I should be highly sensitive to protecting, encouraging, and serving my eternal family in Christ. My inclination should be that of an agent of

peace and healing, not division. Allowing categories from this temporal world to supersede our heavenly allegiance to Christ and our siblings is something that we should avoid and repent of.

Today, we have Christians who are more committed to a political party, a particular tribe, or a set of followers than our heavenly kingdom. Christians are filtering their theology through worldly allegiances instead of their eternal citizenship. This has damaged our witness. We are too quick to slander and cancel anyone who doesn't fall in line with our worldview.

Why would anyone want to listen to the gospel message of Christ from Christians who are just as divided as the unbelievers they preach to? Why be a part of a group of Christians that can't see beyond this world and rarely pursue unity? Jesus said that people would know that we are his disciples by our love for one another, not simply who we vote for or align with.

If we are to have a united global church, then hatred and division cannot flow so easily out of us. Paul says that we should "be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3). To be salt and light in this world as kingdom citizens, requires that our actions display that we are *for* one another, even in our differences, and that we are gracious and patient with one another as we speak truth. If not, we will see new converts in Christ entering a spiritual community that is no different than the physical community they came out of and which stunts their spiritual growth. This is not God's heart.

My hope is that these categories have stirred your heart to consider how you are currently living as an ambassador in your context. I'm rooting for you and praying that Christ will shine brightly through you as you live boldly for him. The Lord bless you and keep you. ★

Jon Kelly is the lead pastor of Chicago West Bible Church.





Seeking the Welfare of the City

AN INTERVIEW ABOUT WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE ACTIVE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Lindsay Nicolet

Recent trends in American politics tempt Christians to two extremes: withdraw completely from the public square or adopt the vicious and worldly tactics deployed by partisan players. But wisdom beckons us to a different response. Attorney Alex Harris, a Harvard Law graduate and former Supreme Court clerk, demonstrates that it is possible for a Christian to helpfully interact in the public square in a way that is gracious, others-focused, and ultimately for the glory of God. Below, Harris helps us see why engaging in the public square matters, how we can think rightly about it, and how we can work for the good of our neighbors.

Lindsay Nicolet: How did you begin to feel called to work and advocate in the public square?

Alex Harris: I trace that back to my early teen years. My parents, Gregg and Sono Harris, were homeschool pioneers and my siblings and I grew up as part of what is known in Christian homeschool circles as the “Joshua Generation.” First-generation homeschool parents were like Moses, fleeing what they saw as a failing public school system and the moral decay of popular culture to raise their children in the wilderness. Our generation, trained and educated with a thoroughly biblical worldview, would rise up to

claim the Promised Land, which meant taking America back for God.

For me, pursuing that calling looked like participating in high school policy debate, working on political campaigns at the local, state, and national level, starting a youth-targeted nonprofit called The Rebelution with my twin brother Brett when we were 16, and writing a book called *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations* at 19. That same calling eventually led me to Patrick Henry College, drawn to its mission to equip graduates to “lead the nation” and “shape the culture,” then Harvard Law School, and then judicial clerkships with then-Judge Neil Gorsuch and Justice Anthony Kennedy at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Over the years, though, my sense of calling has changed and matured, in large part because of my experiences working as a Christian in politics and law. I still feel called as a believer to work and advocate in the public square, but my vision for what that looks like is different. I know we’ll get into more of that in the later questions, but for now I’ll say that I no longer think God needs me to save America, and I’m not sure that should be our goal in the first place.

LN: Why should Christians care about what goes on in politics? How can we think rightly about it?

AH: We should care because politics, broadly defined, is one primary mechanism through which we love our neighbor. We cannot be indifferent to politics because it touches every aspect of our lives, our families, our churches, and our communities, on issues ranging from education, housing, and criminal justice to immigration and religious liberty.

At the same time, politics is not everything. We think rightly about it by engaging in politics to love our neighbor and advance the gospel, all while recognizing that this world is not our home and that our hope is in Christ, not policies, politicians, or parties. In that sense, a believer's posture toward politics is just one expression of our posture toward the world in general. In 1 Peter 2:11, Peter calls us "sojourners and exiles." In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul describes us as "ambassadors for Christ" in a foreign land. Our words and actions, the manner in which we engage and advocate in the public square, represent the kingdom of God to the world.

Another passage that has influenced my understanding of these topics is Jeremiah 29:7, where God commands the exiled Israelites to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." The order is important. The command is not to seek our own welfare, or to seek the welfare of the city only to the extent we see a direct benefit to us, as if the good of the city is just a means to an end.

Instead, the command is to genuinely seek and pray for the city's welfare, despite the fact that we're only temporary residents. But just like the command for children to honor their father and mother, it's a command with a promise. We can confidently seek the good of the city because of God's promise that, in and through its welfare, he will provide for us as well.

LN: What would you say to the salesman, stay-at-home mom, or teacher who

desires to be more active as a Christian in the public square but doesn't know where to start? Are there ways to engage in this type of advocacy without formally working in government or public policy?

AH: The first thing I'd say is to remember that the "public square" is not limited to national or state politics, or to political skirmishes on social media. Most of the decisions that affect our families, neighbors, businesses, and churches happen on the local level. The great news is that local politics is also where our advocacy is most likely to have a real impact, even if we never formally work in government or public policy.

The second thing I'd say is that the single best way to get involved in this type of work is just to be in community,

and local churches that have played that protective role over the years.

LN: What are some of your biggest takeaways from working at the Supreme Court?

AH: Working at the Supreme Court was a dream come true for me. Justice Kennedy was a wonderful boss, truly one of the kindest people I've ever met, and I was still there when my former boss, Justice Gorsuch, joined the court toward the end of the term. Gorsuch had clerked for Kennedy back in the early 1990s. As far as we know, it was the first time that three generations of justices and their clerks had served together at the same time.

Clerking at the court was hard work but also refreshing. On a personal level,

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seek to love your neighbors, and keep your eyes and ears open. If you do that, there will be opportunities.

LN: How did you prepare yourself and what sustains you as a Christian in the midst of your work?

AH: I've found that work in the public square, especially in politics, can quickly warp my perspective. I needed a local community that was outside of that bubble. I needed to regularly be in God's Word and with his people, to feed my soul, to keep my priorities straight, and to equip me to hear the discordant notes both inside and outside my political tribe. I've been so grateful for family, friends,

I was prohibited by judicial ethics from publicly engaging in partisan political activity. After years of being actively involved in politics, that felt like a sort of detox. More generally, despite the characterizations you read so often in the media, the court really is insulated from many of the political pressures and dynamics that permeate the other branches of government.

With few exceptions, I saw the justices and my fellow clerks genuinely trying to get it right. When they disagreed with one another, it was always with the idea and not the person. It was so different from the zero-sum, no-holds-barred world of partisan politics I was used to. Of course, there are many reasons for those

differences, but one of the important ones is the simple fact that the Supreme Court is a small and tight knit community, whose members not only work together but also regularly share meals, share each other's joys and sorrows, and share the very real weight of the public trust.

My experience at the court made me far less interested in fighting partisan battles and much more interested in other ways of engaging with issues in the public square.

LN: Are there any biblical models or principles that you draw from as you carry out your work?

AH: Over the past couple years, one of the principles that has really jumped out at me is the Bible's repeated command that our interactions, disagreements, and even defense of the faith be characterized by "gentleness." Gentleness is an unmistakable biblical imperative for believers, and once you notice it, you'll start seeing it everywhere.

We're told that gentleness is a "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:23. According to Ephesians 4:3, to "walk in a manner worthy" of our calling means to walk "with all humility and gentleness." In the opening verses of Titus 3, Paul instructs Titus to remind the believers "to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be *gentle*, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."

Even as we contend for the faith and seek to be ready to "make a defense," like it says in 1 Peter 3:15, we're commanded to "do it with gentleness and respect." Perhaps most significantly, Jesus describes himself as "gentle and lowly," and taught that it is the "meek," a word often translated as "humble" or "gentle," who will "inherit the earth."

In an age when political and social division is rampant, even in the Church, when it feels like religious freedom is under



attack, and when our "opponents" seem loud, vocal, even hateful, I wonder what would happen if believers would start taking seriously the call to gentleness.

LN: As you do work in the public square, what does it look like to "seek the welfare of the city" specifically in 2022 America?

AH: In recent years, as an attorney in private practice, my engagement in the public square has been more local and focused on my immediate community. I'm serving and supporting my local church in Denver, a city full of distractions and filled with transient people looking to get away from God, their family, and their past.

At the moment, I'm joining my neighbors in opposing the reopening of a bar that had become a serious disturbance and danger to the community. I've also supported or volunteered with different local organizations serving at-risk youth, refugees, expecting mothers, children in foster care, the homeless, and the elderly here in Denver. Each of those is a small way I am seeking the welfare of my city, which I plan to continue.

At the same time, I'm increasingly convinced that there is a growing need and hunger in the Church, perhaps especially among younger Christians, to discover a different way to faithfully engage

with politics and culture. You see that in organizations like the AND Campaign, which seeks to equip believers of all political stripes for faithful civic engagement, marked by a firm commitment to both redemptive justice and values-based policy, not allegiance to a political party.

As someone who has seen the good, bad, and ugly in politics over the last 15 years, but who has also seen the beauty of so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ living out their faith in the public square, I'd love to help cast that vision now and in the years ahead.

LN: Where are the pressure points and temptations to compromise in our line of work, and how do you resist those? How do you strengthen your character as a Christian to stand firm?

AH: The danger is always that our faith is co-opted in service of some cause or interest that is not the gospel and the kingdom of God. This happens whenever Christians compromise what is true and right to win the praise or acceptance of the world. In evangelical circles, we usually think of this in terms of currying favor with left-leaning members of the media, academia, or pop culture. But it can also happen in the other direction, if as Christians we start conforming our

religious convictions to a conservative, libertarian, or Republican worldview.

We should not expect any party platform, man-made philosophy, or political movement to perfectly align with biblical principles. We can and should ally ourselves with others in common cause, and it may be that one group or another is a more frequent ally on shared priorities. But faithfulness ultimately requires allowing Scripture to challenge and critique every party and platform.

The way we resist both of these temptations is what I talked about earlier, being in God's Word, being in community, and inviting our families, friends, and churches to speak into our lives. It's so hard to see clearly when you're in

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the trenches. Politics is so competitive, fast-paced, and relentless, which lends itself to black-and-white, us-versus-them, identity-based thinking on both sides. As Christians, we're called to resist those impulses, but we can't do it alone.

LN: How do you work with people who don't share your faith? And how should we interact with people on the opposite side of an issue?

AH: I'm sure that entire books have been written on these topics, but I'll share a few thoughts from my own experience. First, strive to follow the biblical imperative of gentleness, like we talked about it earlier.

Second, remember that they are your neighbor, made in God's image. That means you are called to love them and treat them with respect, even when you disagree.

Third, don't expect someone who is not a Christian to act or think like one. As believers, while we can and should advocate for biblical morality and ethics, we should be far more concerned with whether we are faithfully acting and thinking like Christians.

Finally, do expect to find common ground, even with people who don't share your faith or political persuasions. Thankfully, the real world is not social media or a TV talk show, which tend to elevate the loudest voices and most extreme views and where the incentive is

to perform for your own side rather than engage in good faith. If you're willing to listen and seek to understand, I think you'll be surprised how willing most people are to reciprocate, and how easy it is to find common ground.

LN: What do you see as the greatest needs in the public square, and how can Christians rise up to meet those?

AH: I do not presume to have the single right answer to this question, but I'd echo much of what I've talked about in previous answers. I'd love to see Christians lead the way out of our broken political culture and for our engagement in the public square to be marked by gentleness, love of neighbor, and fealty to Scripture, even if that leaves us politically homeless.

I'm also struck by the fact that so many people are hurting right now. We're coming out of a global pandemic, we're processing the constant, heartbreaking news out of Ukraine, and I think most people would agree that the last few years have been exhausting on every level: physical, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual. On top of that, we're still dealing with all of the normal brokenness of living in a fallen, sinful world. So while this observation has always been true, you really have no idea what burdens someone may be carrying.

Alarmingly, pastors, who have such an important role to play in their local communities, including by equipping their congregations to faithfully engage in the public square, are burned out and leaving the ministry in increasing numbers. We need grace, and we need to give one another grace. The good news is that we can do that, because all the grace we need is already ours in Christ. ★

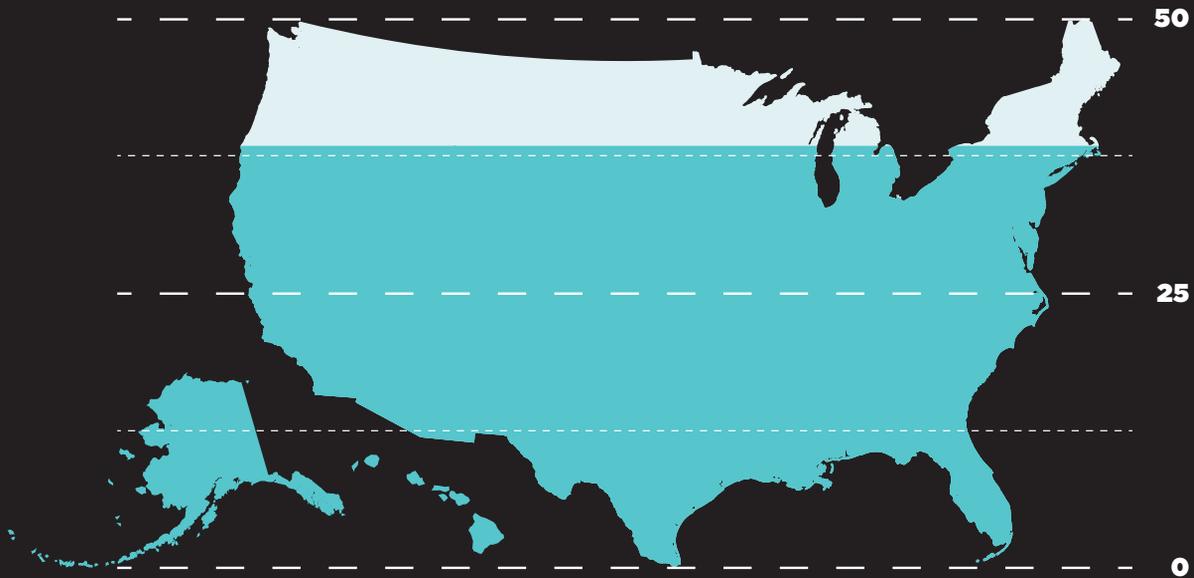
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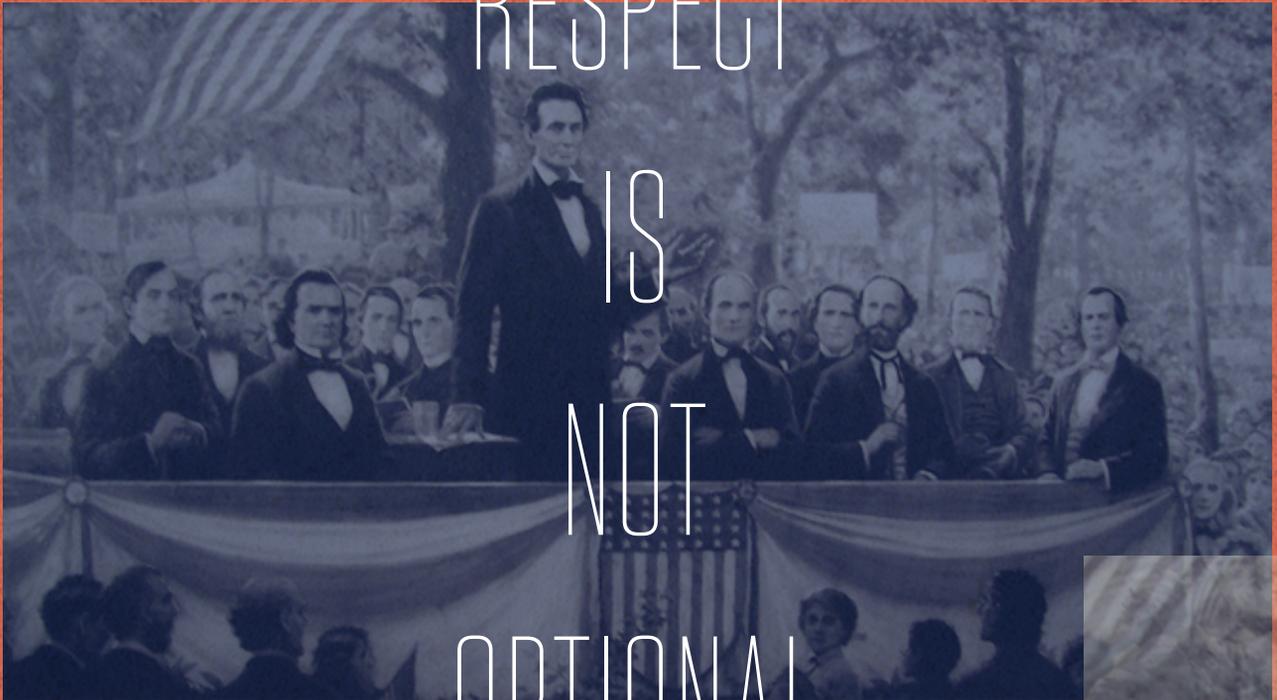
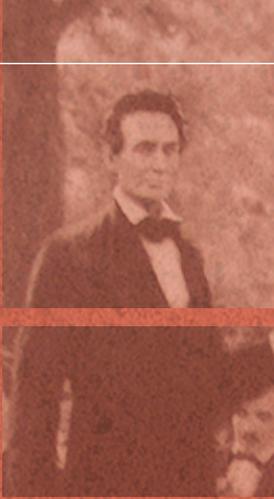


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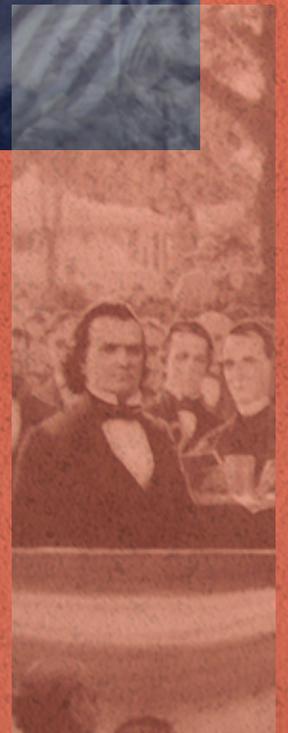
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**HOW CHRISTIANS
SHOULD APPROACH OUR
IDEOLOGICAL OPPONENTS**

Daniel Darling



IT WOULD BE HARD TO FIND someone more conservative than Cal Thomas. Once an architect of the Moral Majority, Thomas has been a longtime pundit and a syndicated columnist.

It would also be harder to find someone more liberal than Bob Beckel. Bob campaigned for Al Gore and was a left-wing fixture on cable news. Beckel and Thomas worked together for years at Fox News and, surprisingly, became close friends. When Beckel recently passed away, Thomas wrote this tribute to his friendship:

We traveled together, ate together, and got to know each other and our respective “stories” in ways that rarely happen in Washington these days. At the end of our presentation, I would say that I rejected the notion that Bob was on “the other side.” Both of our fathers were in World War II. They weren’t fighting for or against Franklin Roosevelt, but to preserve an ideal. America has always been an idea in search of the ideal. If we want to put someone on the other side, make them external enemies like the Ayatollah in Iran, or the leadership in China and Russia. Let’s not destroy each other. We are fellow Americans.

Bob would then get up and say how I had saved his life and introduced him to God and other nice things. We embraced, prompting wild cheers from the audience. People would say, “Why can’t we see more of this in Washington?” It helped that neither of us were interested in running for office, which would mean having to raise money and say things to satisfy various interest groups.

At his memorial service this week there will be Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. It will be a moment of common ground. Bob was my closest and dearest friend. His hope and mine is that

our friendship will serve as an example to others of what can be and must be if we are to survive as a nation.¹

Is it possible to have friendships like this, with people who don’t share your politics? It seems increasingly difficult in this polarized age. And yet Thomas and Beckel modeled something refreshing and, I dare say, biblical. So how should Christians approach people with whom they disagree ideologically?

This isn’t exhaustive, but I’d like to offer four principles of engagement:

1 DON'T BE AFRAID OF SUBSTANTIVE DISAGREEMENT

Following Christ in this age or in any age will require us to hold beliefs that are at odds, at some point, with the prevailing culture. This doesn’t mean we’ve done something wrong. Instead, it means that what Jesus said to his disciples about the controversial way of the cross is true. Christians need courage in this age to boldly speak the truth. What the Scriptures say, for instance, about the sanctity of human life, sexual ethics, or care for the immigrant is unpopular in many places.

Sometimes, in our well-meaning attempts toward civility, we can be tempted to soften some of the edges of Scripture. We shouldn’t do that. It’s not loving to speak untruth. So to be a Christian in the world will mean, at some points, we will have disagreements with those around us as we remain faithful to God’s Word.

2 UNDERSTAND THAT CHRISTIANS CAN BE BOTH COURAGEOUS AND CIVIL

While our biblical convictions will bring us to a place of disagreement with many, we should understand that the Bible doesn’t just care about the substance of what we believe and declare,



but how we say it. The Apostle Peter, no stranger to conflict, who wasn't afraid to go to jail for his faith, nevertheless, instructs believers to "have an answer for every man for the hope that lies within you, but do it with gentleness and kindness" (1 Peter 3:15).

Peter is writing this to an early church that is facing increasing marginalization and persecution. Christians were losing jobs, losing friendships, losing cultural influence, all because they had the audacity to declare that Christ, and not Caesar, was king.

And yet he urges the people of God to both stand firm on the truth of the gospel and to treat those who disagree

early church, he wrote, "With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness (James 3:9)." James is warning against speech that assaults the humanity of God's image-bearers. Why should we respect our ideological opponents and treat them with kindness even as we disagree? Because they were made in the image of God.

Too often we are tempted to reduce someone's whole existence down to that bad argument they make or that bad opinion, but they are whole people, made in the image of God. The opinion they hold, that belief system that anchors them is only one part of who they are.

This is where Christians can be unique as battles rage in the public square. We can show the world a distinctly Christian way of speaking, that even as we make forceful arguments, we can do it with a kind of heavenly grace, where those who hear us may not agree, but know that we respect their humanity and dignity.

4 ENGAGE ARGUMENTS AND RESIST CARICATURES

Tim Keller, in his book, *Center Church*, writes:

Do all the work necessary until you can articulate the views of your opponent with such strength and clarity that he or she could say, "I couldn't have said it better myself." Then, and only then, will your polemics have integrity *and* actually have the possibility of being persuasive.²

The temptation is to caricature the views of those we disagree with, in order to get a rise out of an audience sympathetic to our own views. So much of our public debates are not designed to persuade the unpersuadable, but signal to our own constituency that we are sufficiently mad at the other side. But if we really desire to engage, to persuade, to make arguments that those who are

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with them with gentleness and kindness. The rightness of their worldview didn't excuse rhetorical sins. There are no exceptions in the New Testament for not growing in the fruit of the Spirit.

3 RECOGNIZE THE DIGNITY OF THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE

The Apostle James also has a word for the way we engage arguments. To the



on the fence might believe, we need to engage arguments our ideological opponents are actually making, not straw men we knock down for sport.

This is what Paul is getting at in 2 Corinthians:

Since the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds. We demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-6).

We engage arguments with the truth of Scripture, in the power of the Spirit, and with genuine love for those who disagree. I want to end with this quote, from the man whose name is affixed to the center I lead, about someone on the other side of the political aisle. After her passing, former ERLC president, Richard Land, wrote this about former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright:

Madeleine Albright's life provides a truly inspiring story of the triumph of the human spirit. While, as you would imagine, Madeleine and I had significant disagreements on many important issues, I always loved and

appreciated Secretary Albright's deep and abiding love for America—her adopted country.

The example of Land honoring Albright, despite very real ideological differences, is one we should seek to emulate, especially in our outrage culture. For Christians, showing respect to our fellow image-bearers is not an option. As we entrust ourselves, and this polarized age, to our sovereign Father, we don't need more hostility, which only leads to more division. We need more fruit of the Spirit as we seek to speak the truth in love and set our hopes on the kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28). ★

Daniel Darling is the director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement at SWBTS.

1 "Beckel and Me: An Odd Couple | Cal Thomas," News-Herald (blog), March 6, 2022, <https://www.news-herald.com/2022/03/06/beckel-and-me-an-odd-couple-cal-thomas>.

2 "Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City - Kindle Edition by Keller, Timothy. Religion & Spirituality Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.Com.," 376–80, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.amazon.com/Center-Church-Balanced-Gospel-Centered-Ministry-ebook/dp/B005JSGB5Q>.

3 Richard D. Land and Christian Post Executive Editor, "An Evangelical's Appreciation of Madeleine Albright," The Christian Post, March 29, 2022, <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/an-evangelicals-appreciation-of-madeleine-albright.html>.



SET APART *from the* WORLD

WHY OUR FAITH DOESN'T
STOP AT THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Josh Wester

I used to completely misunderstand Augustine. When it comes to Christianity and the public square, there is no more influential book than his famous *City of God*. He wrote that massive, 600-plus page work after Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 A.D. Though he was writing to

defend the faith against those blaming Christianity for Rome's downfall—they blamed Christians for displacing Rome's gods and saw the invasion as evidence of the gods' anger and judgment—Augustine produced much more than a timely apology of the faith. Instead, *City of God* became an enduring articulation



of the positive role of the Christian faith in society and culture.

The central framework of Augustine's work is the idea of two cities existing in the world together: the city of man and the city of God. At the risk of oversimplifying Augustine's primary illustration, he saw one city as devoted to the things of God while the other city is devoted to the things of the world. For a long time, I assumed I understood what Augustine meant. I thought he was suggesting Christians were members of both cities, that we are devoted to God as we live our lives in the world.

As it turns out, that concept is true and important, but it isn't what Augustine meant at all. Instead, he drew the distinction between the city of man and the city of God to show us that Christians are members of one city—the city devoted to God—and not the other.

DEBUNKING THE SACRED/SECULAR MYTH

Realizing that I had misunderstood Augustine led me to a second conclusion. Jesus tells us in his famous Sermon on the Mount that his people are to live in the world as salt and light. What do these two things have in common? They are distinct. Like me, many assume Augustine's point was that Christians live like the world sometimes as members of the city of man but then live distinct from the world other times as members of the city of God.

But Augustine was actually saying what Jesus said: Christians are to be set apart from the world at all times. Salt is always distinct. Light is never darkness. And this has everything to do with the way that Christians are called to live in the world.

Some people believe that being distinct from the world requires withdrawing from the world. This shows up in various traditions, from Catholic monasteries to Amish communities. And while this may hold value for some, asceticism is not a

real option for most Christians. Not only that, but it wasn't the way that Jesus taught his disciples to live. And it wasn't the way most of the Christians under Augustine's ministry lived either.

In fact, when we explore the reason Jesus describes his followers as "the light of the world," we learn that the world is supposed to see our lives. Jesus tells us the world is supposed to "see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Being salt and light means that Christians represent Jesus all the time.



Christians are to be set apart from the world at all times.

Salt is always distinct. Light is never darkness. And this has everything to do with the way that Christians are called to live in the world.

This is important because, for too long, Christians generally understood our lives to be divided into spheres: sacred and secular. We assumed that some things we do, like going to church or reading the Bible or going on a mission trip, were sacred things. Those were the holy parts of our lives that we committed to God. But the rest of our lives were secular. For most people, that includes their jobs and their hobbies and all the other things they do that don't feel spiritual or religious.



The sacred/secular divide was a harmful development for the Church. It separated the Church into two classes of people: a professional ministerial class whose lives and vocations were dedicated to the sacred, and the rest of the church whose lives were mostly secular. The idea was that some Christians are called to a special kind of holy life dedicated to ministry, while most Christians were merely called to dedicate a few hours a week to holy things as they mostly supported (or observed) the ministry work of professional Christians. But this completely misses Jesus' call toward discipleship.

Every Christian is a disciple of Jesus. And the call for every disciple is the same. We are to follow Jesus and live our lives in a way that reflects his life and brings glory and honor to him (Col. 3:17). This also means there is no professional class of Christians. Nor is there an actual divide between things sacred and secular in the life of the believer. If you are a follower of Jesus, everything you do is dedicated to him. He lays claim to our whole lives. And he sends us out to live as salt and light in the world.

This has significant implications for Christians when it comes to the public square. Because Jesus lays claim to all we are, there is nothing that we do apart from our identity as disciples. So whether you work on Wall Street or Main Street, your job is to take Jesus with you into that work. And that shapes everything from the way you pursue relationships with your co-workers to your work ethic to the actual work that you do. For the believer, nothing is ever truly secular because we never do anything apart from Jesus.

BEARING WITNESS TO JESUS, ALL THE TIME

I'm writing this a few days after the conclusion of the 2022 Masters Tournament. I'm not an avid golf fan. But this particular year I got sucked in with all of the excitement surrounding



Tiger Woods making a surprise appearance in Augusta. As the rounds went by, the eventual winner emerged at the top of the leaderboard. His name is Scottie Scheffler. And in the final round, all eyes were on him.

Naturally, the commentary focused on the details of Scheffler's life, and as they did so, I learned that he is a serious Christian. And after winning his first major and the iconic green jacket, the 25-year-old golfer gave an interview in which he demonstrated what it means



to live as salt and light. Scheffler said, “The reason why I play golf is I’m trying to glorify God and all that he’s done in my life.”¹ He also talked about a conversation he had with his wife beforehand where she reminded him that Jesus loved him regardless of how well he played.

Scheffler had the opportunity to bear witness to Jesus on one of the largest stages in professional sports. What made his testimony so meaningful was not his

and lawyers, business owners and high school coaches. Some are pastors and missionaries and some are professional athletes, but most are none of those things. Regardless, all of us are called to bear witness to Jesus in our lives, words, work, and deeds.

This is true even for those Christians in the political arena. At this time, there are politicians and public servants at almost every level of government who

*The goal of living as salt and light
is to let the world see Jesus in and
through your life.*

exemplary level of play (as stunning as it was), but the fact that his life had consistently demonstrated the distinctness of his faith. His words and actions—his character—out of the limelight stood in congruence with the words he spoke in his post-tournament interview about glorifying God as a golfer.

Scheffler’s testimony refutes the idea that there is a sacred/secular divide. He does not set aside his identity as a disciple when he steps out on the links. Instead, the whole of his life is a platform to point others to Jesus, and right now his career in the PGA is a central part of that platform. God willing, Scheffler will continue to use his gifts for this purpose. But as he recognized, neither God’s glory nor God’s love depend upon his success.

Lest we think one must be famous or exemplary to live as salt and light, we should remember that most followers of Jesus are actually very normal people (1 Cor. 1:26-27). Today they are teachers and doctors, truck drivers

are seeking to faithfully live as salt and light as they perform their duties as public servants. As they do so, their goal should always be to enact and support laws and policies that honor God and seek the good of their neighbors. (And though it is a discussion for another time, they can do all of this without ever threatening the separation of church and state).

The goal of living as salt and light is to let the world see Jesus in and through your life. When it comes to the public square, everywhere you find a Christian you should also find Jesus. Christians do not step in and out of the sacred parts of our lives. We bear witness to Jesus all the time, in everything we do. And together, we pray that the light emanating from the city of God will push back the darkness in the city of man. ★

Josh Wester is an associate pastor at Redemption Church in Mobile, Alabama.

¹ <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=EsGakPDO-Yo>



THE

WOMEN
OF THE
CHURCH

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS ABOUT CHRISTIANS'
ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Katie Frugé

“For Christians to withdraw themselves from the world of politics is poor strategy. It leaves the salt in the saltshaker. It is good salt, yet it is never used for seasoning.” - Phil Strickland.

Engaging in the public square is a tricky business. We can be canceled for the truth, go viral with a well-phrased lie, or become a cultural influencer without offering much culture or influence. For all of the dangers that follow taking a stand, we inevitably find ourselves returning to the public square to learn, connect, and discuss.

To engage or not engage in the public square is rarely the question. We are naturally drawn to the meeting places of our communities to discuss the issues that matter the most. The meeting places change, but from Mars Hill to Myspace to the metaverse, we continue to meet. Scripture is far less concerned with telling us to engage in the public square (although we should) but rather on *how* to engage in the marketplace of ideas and *why*.

HOW CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

In Matthew 5, Christ lays out a guide for how his followers are to engage in the public square to reflect His kingdom and priorities. Through his teaching, we see that believers are to engage with purpose, passion, and priorities.

Purpose.

Just as salt serves a specific function to enhance and complement its surroundings, believers serve and minister in the public sphere with intentional purpose. Engagement in the public square cannot be haphazard or sloppy. In a world of polarization, ideological grandstanding, and outrage, a Christian’s involvement in the public square should be intentional, purposeful, and meaningful.

When we take stands, are they for the glory and honor of God and his kingdom, or do they merely add to the white noise of debate or outrage? Salt of the earth Christians engage in the public square with purpose, knowing well the potency of their impact and wielding that responsibility with careful consideration.

THE WHY OF THE CHURCH HAS BEEN, AND ALWAYS WILL BE, THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST.

Passion.

As a city on a hill or a lamp shining in dark places, we cannot lessen the nature of who we are. A fire cannot dim its blaze; a city on a hill cannot be less visible. We engage, advocate, and dialogue with passion because that is the very essence of who God created us to be.

As Christians engage in the public square, we do so with full confidence in the truth of who we are (followers of Christ) and our message (the gospel of Christ). Christian passion is not in distinction to the command to engage with civility, respect, and dignity, but rather a manifestation of it (1 Pet. 3:15-17).

Priorities.

There will never be a shortage of issues the human imagination can come up with to discuss and debate. However, as ambassadors of Christ in the public square, our priorities are clear: the building of the kingdom of God so that others would see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). A mature engagement in the public square understands the issues that are worth struggling through and when to step away from foolish and ignorant arguments (2 Tim. 2:23).

It seems absurd to wonder how many angels can dance on the head of a pin (the infamous query of medieval scholasticism), but deciphering the modern equivalent is difficult.

Social media and the rise of online platforms have made prioritizing issues to engage with more challenging. Across a spectrum of polarized opinions, how do we factor in James' command to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19)? To what extent do we contest with conspiracy theories, fake news, or misinformation?

One key to anchoring our understanding of how and when to engage on these issues is to remain steadfastly committed to why we ought to engage in the first place.

THE PRIORITY OF THE CHURCH

The why of the Church has been, and always will be, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We do not engage in the public square to build our own platform, notoriety, or influence. The message of the gospel of Christ is not a weapon to be wielded for personal gain. When the gospel is weaponized for political or partisan gain, it is irreversibly compromised and no longer the life-giving, truth-speaking message of the King and kingdom of heaven. Certainly, we are to engage in truth and power, but only so that others would come to know Christ and him crucified.

We engage in the public square because Christ has commanded us to (Matt. 28:18-20), yet as disciples of Christ, we operate from a different value system (John 15). As many have said before, the gospel is innately political, but it is not partisan. We engage and even civilly disagree, but always so that others may see our works and glorify the One who created all.

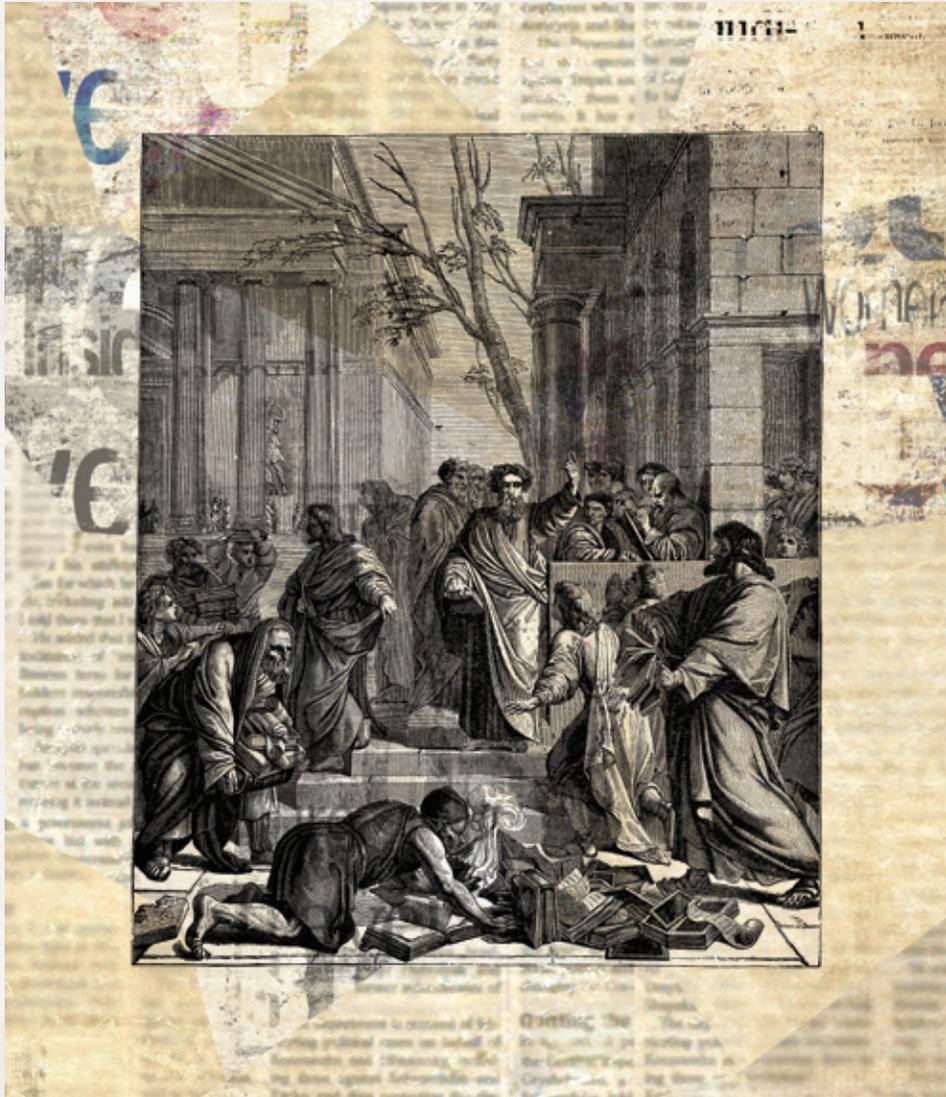
Christians have an ancient charge to care for the poor and vulnerable, be an advocate for God's justice, and speak truth against systemic evils and concerns that are contrary to the kingdom of God. In our modern context, many of these issues are laced with partisan adherents. But God is not limited to the elephant or donkey—we serve the Lamb, and the priorities his church has followed for over two millennia.

We engage in the public square recognizing that our enemies are not flesh and blood, our battle is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:12). We battle for Christ's truth and priorities in order that we may share the liberating and love-filled truth with individuals lost in darkness.

As salt and light, we engage in the public square with purpose, passion, and priorities—but never divorced from our ancient bond to Christ and His transformative gospel. Part of discipleship under Christ and His Church is deciphering between hasty engagement and being afraid to stand up for the truth of Christ. Standing aside, not engaging, or engaging poorly leaves the salt in the shaker. ★

Katie Frugé is the director of the Center for Cultural Engagement for Texas Baptists.

THE BEAUTY OF TRANSCENDENT TRUTHS



Appealing to Non-Christians in the Public Square

Andrew T. Walker

What if I told you that many of the moral presuppositions—such as human rights and dignity—that our culture operates on, even those who would call themselves “secular” or “progressive,” borrow largely from a Christian worldview? If that’s the case, then the way Christians operate in our culture with non-Christians is really a matter of showing them that attempting to divorce those concepts from their foundation in the Christian faith is illogical.

Everyone is benefiting from having lived in a civilization influenced by Christianity. The question is how to help non-Christians recognize that reality. One of the easiest ways for Christians to appeal to non-Christians and to work in the public square with them is to remind them that we are the carriers of a moral tradition that grounds, explains, and secures concepts like human rights, dignity, and the very nature of truth itself.

WHAT CHRISTIANITY OFFERS

Let’s take something almost universally celebrated in our culture, the Declaration of Independence. Its famous words read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This famous declaration of American ideals cannot be understood apart from the Christian

(and Enlightenment) worldview that birthed it.

This does not mean that America is a Christian nation or that our Founders were all born-again Christians. It does mean, however, that Christianity profoundly influenced the philosophical currents that our Founders swam in. Take just a few of its words: “Truth,” “self-evident,” “equal,” “endowed,” “Creator,”

These concepts we take for granted, like truth, rights, and human dignity, make possible one of the most basic explanations for how Christians think about our shared existence alongside non-Christians, and that’s working for and obtaining the common good of all people.

“unalienable rights,” “life,” “liberty,” and “happiness.” These deeply theological concepts do not just arise from people asserting them to be true. Rather, they must be grounded in transcendent truths if they are to be coherent.

The idea that there are self-evident truths means that everyone understands fundamental moral principles by virtue of being human (e.g., murder is wrong), a truth that is indebted to Scripture (Romans 1). The idea that humans are equal was a fantastical claim at the time—it insisted that every person deserves the same types of protections simply by virtue of their existence, drawn from a wellspring stretching back to Genesis 1. The Declaration insists these truths emanate from our Creator, and the “rights” that humans enjoy

by virtue of being human are the very reason why governments are ordained—to protect and secure them so that we can flourish.

But where does the idea that humans have any value or rights worth recognizing come from in the first place? That’s where Christianity comes in. The power of Christianity is that it gave coherence to a framework of universal dignity and equality. Though not always carried out perfectly, the logic of universal dignity was found in the earliest pages of Genesis where man and woman both bear the image of God.

Further, Christianity placed limits on the power of those in authority by reminding them that they were subject to a higher power. If God is God, then Caesar is not (Matthew 22). Christianity provided the foundation to see each person as bearing inviolable rights under the rule of law.

Even when the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights was drafted, it was reported that one of the members of the drafting committee left the meeting and told a reporter, “We are unanimous about these rights on the condition that no one asks why.” That’s a stunning admission. It reminds us that all human beings desire certain freedoms to live lives of integrity, meaning, and purpose.

However secular and religious, worldview systems have an immensely difficult time explaining why this moral impulse exists and why it should be protected at all costs. Christianity offers something that other belief systems

cannot adequately match—an explanation. It's easy to take that for granted, and indeed, our culture does just that.

This is not to imply that America and Christians have a perfect record on human rights. Christians, just like the world, can get things grievously wrong. We can be cowards, hypocrites, and oppressors if we're following the culture rather than Christ. We see this in no more of a glaring example than the Declaration of Independence's incoherence of announcing that all men are created equal even as slave owners drafting the document held fellow image-bearers in bondage.

All this reminds us of is that we can have logs in our eyes while focusing on the speck in others' (Matt. 7:5). We need to be constantly evaluating our moral principles against Scripture, and publicly admit and repent when we find ourselves in error.

THE CHRISTIAN'S PATH FORWARD

The British historian Tom Holland, himself not a Christian, was asked in a recent forum how he thought Christians should position themselves in an increasingly post-Christian and even anti-Christian culture. In his remarkable reply, he explains what an appealing path forward for Christians should embody:

Because the West has been so hegemonic for so long, it's been in a position to assume its concept of human rights is universal. They don't need to think about it. Of course, human rights exist. What the rise of China and other civilizational powers is doing is to remind us that the concept of human rights is one that has emerged in

a specific cultural matrix, which is a Christian one. Therefore, if you want to believe in human rights, you have to believe. It takes a leap of faith to believe that there are things called human rights just as much as it takes a leap of faith to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

They're both beliefs.

And the fact is that most people in the west sign up to the fact that human rights exist and they're important and that they should determine public policy. It's as rooted in theology and myth and metaphysics as all the teachings of Christianity. And, I think once people are reminded of that, I think [it] becomes impossible not to feel

a greater sense of what Christianity is about. If you believe in human rights, why not believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Reminding people that the core beliefs that are fundamental to how people morally define themselves is rooted in faith reopens the possibility for secularists to recognize that they have not emancipated themselves from their need for faith. They continue to illustrate it and contemplating that then reopens the possibility to think well, "Where might this practice of believing in fantastical things might lead?"¹

Did you catch what Holland is saying? He's saying that it's a good and necessary apologetic for Christians to bring

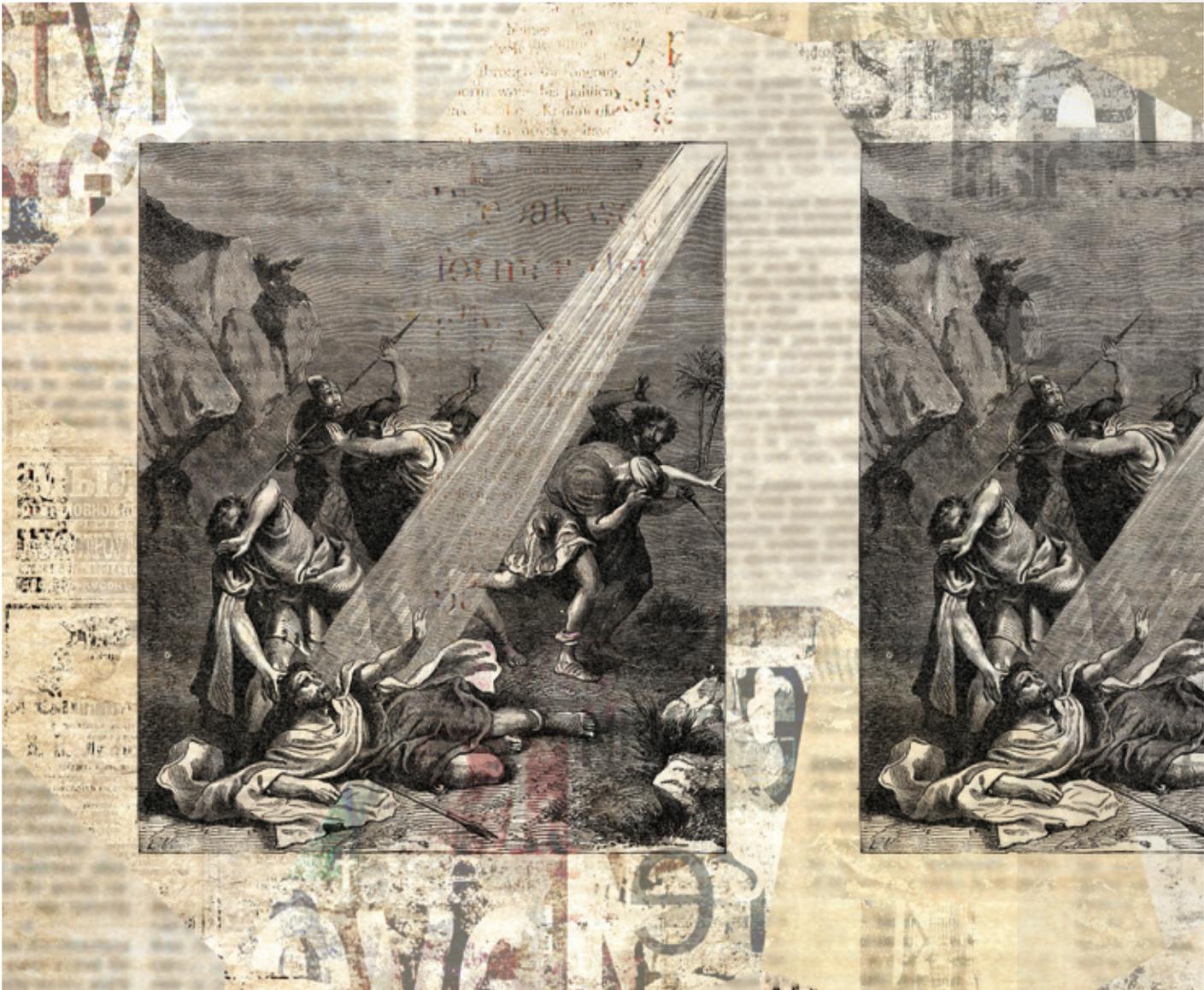
up their contribution to human rights doctrine, but we shouldn't stop there. The same God who values human beings is the same God who Christians believe raised Jesus from the dead. We should not shy away from declaring both.

A non-Christian is giving Christians a playbook that says, in effect, "If you like

Societal institutions that benefit the whole such as hospitals, universities, and charity foundations, as well as ideas about equality and dignity such as children's rights and women's suffrage, all draw upon the intellectual basis of Christian principles that have animated nations and cultures.

the human rights doctrine that Christianity helped further, then just wait until you hear about Jesus Christ rising from the dead." These aren't unrelated realities. The same God who gives life is the same God who resurrects it.

These concepts we take for granted, like truth, rights, and human dignity, make possible one of the most basic explanations for how Christians think about our shared existence alongside non-Christians, and that's working for and obtaining the common good of all people. The common good is the idea that civil society and civil government should strive to promote or facilitate the conditions for human flourishing. In other words, we should care about our neighbor, and the common good is the love of neighbor in the aggregate.



The common good assumes that there are natural goods to human experience that ought to be realized throughout a society. The government, whether by building safe roadways, imprisoning criminals, or prioritizing the natural family, helps to promote those characteristics of a society that promotes true human flourishing connected to moral foundations.

Christians think all these things matter because God orders the world according to common grace. All things being equal, the common good allows individuals operating within mediating

institutions to cooperate toward the advancement of a just society by experiencing the excellencies that define their existence. The idea that society should have meaning, order, and purpose and that all individuals should experience it for themselves is something that Christianity helped further.

Societal institutions that benefit the whole such as hospitals, universities, and charity foundations, as well as ideas about equality and dignity such as children's rights and women's suffrage, all draw upon the intellectual basis of Christian

principles that have animated nations and cultures. Christians only need to help the rest of the world see that those things we hold most dear are the result of the influence of Christianity in the public square. They do not need to provide a more timely apologetic, but rather a reminder about these timeless truths. ★

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6w7qw9kJ9k>



Is the Lesser of Two Evils the Right Question?

CHRISTIANS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN A WILDLY IMPERFECT WORLD

Dana Hall McCain

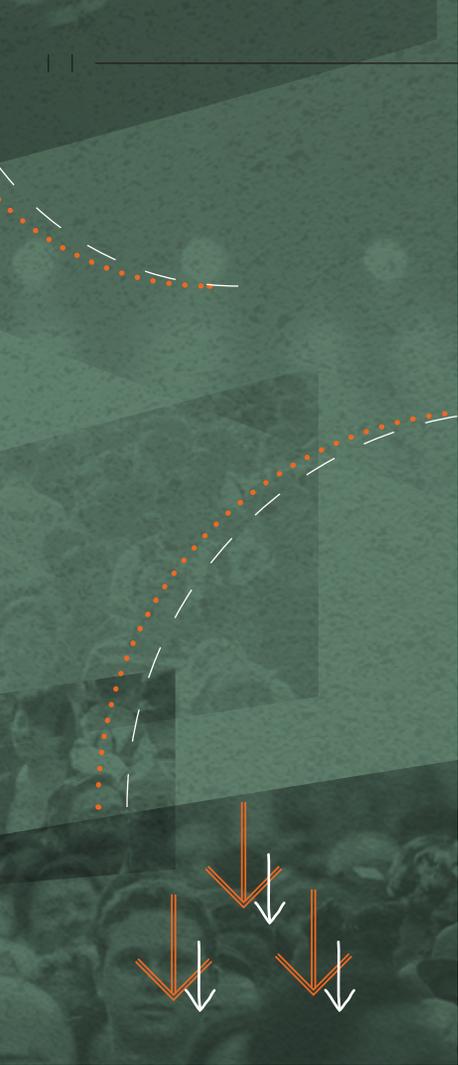
 On the Sunday before the 2016 general election, I visited family a few hours from home and attended church with them. The pastor acknowledged the tension that many in the congregation felt regarding the election and the controversial presidential candidates involved. His opening sentence on the topic rang true to me: “You don’t have a

godly candidate on the ballot on Tuesday, and the reason you don’t is because of our great sin.” The flawed candidates, he said, were a reflection of us as a nation.

In a world that seems more opposed to the teachings of Scripture by the day, Christians frequently face a slate of choices, all of which fail to meet God’s standards of righteousness in some way. How do we cope with a world that

repeatedly asks us to choose between the lesser of two evils? After all, the lesser evil is still, by definition, evil. And God’s Word calls us to avoid even the appearance of such (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

At the same time, fully withdrawing from public engagement makes us disobedient in another sense by ignoring the biblical charges to speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15), advocate for justice



(Isaiah 1:17), and protect the vulnerable. When we walk away from “the great conversation,” we leave a void where the wisdom of God should be represented.

I believe that as sojourners in a fallen world, we are called to do the best we can with the circumstances we’re given. Sometimes this may mean choosing an imperfect option. It might look like voting for a flawed candidate to prevent the even greater wrong we believe their opponent would do. It could mean supporting a bill that accomplishes some things that we know are pleasing to God, even if it doesn’t go as far as we know it should go.

The danger in this type of public engagement is that it can confuse non-believing observers who don’t understand our rationale. They may interpret our action as fully representative of the teachings of the Christian faith when it most certainly is not. Worse yet, it may confuse us if we fully buy into our team’s talking points.

So how do we avoid these misunderstandings?

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY

I think the keys to walking this tightrope with integrity lie in two areas: honest comparison of the choices we face to the biblical standard and honest communication about our engagement.

Like all modern marketing and communication, the American political machine is scarily good at pushing our buttons to elicit feelings that turn into action. They come to each issue armed with mountains of polling data and research revealing what makes us tick: what we fear and what we value. Whether they’re selling a candidate or a cause, they sell it in an all-upside, no-downside way.

Legions of highly paid consultants convince you that if you don’t vote or engage as they suggest, disaster is inevitable, and all of your deepest fears will come to pass. Similarly, they present their favored candidate/initiative as a cure-all for your concerns, with no baggage.

Intellectually, we know this isn’t true. But emotionally, we get pulled in. We respond to the appeal and invest.

This moment of investment is where civic engagement can go off the rails for Christians. Once we choose a candidate or cause—and especially if we publicly declare our affiliation with such—we are psychologically incentivized to think and speak of our choice positively, emphasizing what is good about it and staying quiet about what is not. We may rationalize that this is strategically necessary to rally others to our cause and ensure that our team wins the day.

There will be time for the whole truth later, we think. Now is the time to win.

But as believers, we are called to hold each decision—every day—up to the light of God’s Word, judging it fairly by that standard alone. We must overcome the psychological temptation to recast our marginally better choice as a genuinely righteous one. We must be honest

with ourselves and others about how our choices do and do not measure up to God’s standard.

When we misrepresent our imperfect choices as truly righteous, we compromise

IF WE ARE TO HONOR GOD IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE, OUR PARTICIPATION AND THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT IT MUST BE CONSISTENTLY FAITHFUL AND PAINFULLY HONEST.

our integrity and misrepresent our Savior before a lost and dying world. We make it harder for the people we’re called to evangelize to believe us about the most important thing—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That’s a terrible trade.

I think Christians must remain engaged in the culture and the political process. But we must say goodbye to the unqualified cheerleading that others enjoy. If we are to honor God in the public square, our participation and the way we talk about it must be consistently faithful and painfully honest. This will make us outliers in many conversations where others feel free to give full-throated endorsements of things we know miss the mark in key ways.

However, we can trust God to work through our faithfulness to accomplish his purposes, despite what the modern rules of political and cultural engagement may suggest. ★

Dana Hall McCain writes a regular column about faith, culture, and politics for Alabama Media Group.





More than Just the Moral Majority

Evangelicals, the GOP, and
the Global Political Landscape

Thomas Kidd

We've heard the claim a million times: "81% of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump." Some news outlets clarify that 81% of *white* evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016, but even that assertion is murky and somewhat misleading. Probably only about 55% of American evangelicals have voted in recent presidential elections, a slightly higher percentage than the general population. And when pollsters and journalists say "evangelicals," they usually just mean people who *identify* as evangelicals.

"Evangelical" is typically not keyed to church attendance or evangelical beliefs. When pollsters ask about such matters, they discover that a significant subset of self-identified evangelicals hardly ever go to church, and that some hold beliefs that wouldn't normally characterize an evangelical. So what "the 81%" actually means is "81% of self-identified white American evangelical voters" voted for Donald Trump.

Put into a global religious perspective, this only tells us about a sliver of the world evangelical community's politics. The claim also dilutes the historic meaning of evangelical, by lumping people who do not attend church or hold characteristically

evangelical beliefs into an undifferentiated mass, together with many practicing and believing evangelicals.

Complex factors produced this politicized (and Republicanized) view of evangelicals. One reason is that, of course, many practicing white evangelical voters *have* more or less enthusiastically supported Donald Trump's GOP, due to issues such as Republicans' official opposition to abortion.

The stereotypical story of the white evangelical alignment with the GOP goes back to Jerry Falwell Sr. and his Moral Majority organization. As the story goes, Falwell and the Moral Majority backed Ronald Reagan over the more recognizably evangelical Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election, creating the fusion that weathered the Trumpian storm.

A History of Evangelicals and the GOP

But the evangelical alliance with the GOP is actually at least as old as the 1952 election.

The evangelist Billy Graham had skyrocketed to national fame in the late 1940s, turning him into a kingmaker in national politics. Graham was one of the most

effective gospel preachers in world history, but he was also a staunch Cold Warrior and anticommunist. Thus in 1952, Graham helped to recruit Dwight Eisenhower to run for president, primarily due to the general's anticommunist credentials and sterling leadership record in World War II. Eisenhower was not especially pious, but he valued the Judeo-Christian tradition as a great cultural bulwark against atheistic communism.

From 1952 forward, white evangelicals have tended to vote Republican for president. This was especially the case for Northern evangelicals. The Northeast and Midwest were the historic centers of American evangelicalism at the time, while the major Southern denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, were not uniformly evangelical. (The SBC would, of course, become more consistently evangelical as a result of the Conservative Resurgence in the 1980s and '90s.)

Southern evangelicals, despite Graham's prominent backing of Republican presidents, were slower to support the GOP, due to white Southerners' historic commitment to the Democratic Party. That commitment went back to the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and it was reenergized by Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal in the 1930s. White Southerners (including evangelicals) began to waver in their attachment to the Democratic coalition in the 1960s, amidst the civil rights movement, and a growing belief that the GOP was tougher on communism than the Democrats.

Still, as of 1976 many white evangelical Southerners supported Carter, a Georgia Democrat, despite Carter's pro-choice stance and his support for the Equal Rights Amendment, which promised legal equality between men and women.

Thus, 1980 and the Moral Majority were decisive in the history of American evangelical politics, but more for Southerners than for American evangelicals generally. Falwell convinced many white Southern Christians that Reagan was their preferred choice, due to Reagan's pro-life views (ones recently adopted) and his anticommunist *bona fides*. Reagan would make little headway on the abortion issue, and his nominations of Sandra Day O'Connor and Anthony Kennedy to the Supreme Court would guarantee the survival of the pro-choice precedent in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). But Reagan's defense spending and negotiations with the Soviet Union set the stage for the fall of the Berlin Wall, and for the ultimate collapse of the USSR in 1991.

The Moral Majority, which disbanded in 1989, was undoubtedly important in the evolution of evangelical politics, but it was not as decisive as some might suggest. The 1980 election saw the culmination of trends that had been developing for three decades. Most white "evangelical" voters—practicing or not—have voted for GOP presidential candidates, whomever he might be, since 1952.

Like Eisenhower or Richard Nixon, Reagan's personal evangelical credentials were not clear. But Reagan certainly knew a lot of evangelicals and Pentecostals, and he knew how to talk like them. George W. Bush was probably the most distinctively evangelical president since Carter, due to Bush's dramatic conversion experience, but even his church membership was at a mainline United Methodist congregation. Mitt Romney's 2012 candidacy was a new kind of strength test for evangelical commitment to the GOP. Obviously the Mormon Romney was not an evangelical in a historic or doctrinal sense. Yet evangelical support for Romney

remained high, due to familiar factors such as Romney's pro-life convictions.

Donald Trump's rocky marital history and sometimes uncouth behavior tested the evangelical-GOP fusion again, but in the end, his persona and controversial politics were not enough to erode the alliance. Undoubtedly much of the white evangelical support for Trump reflected opposition to Democrats' sometimes extreme stances on culture war issues, such as marriage and gender. Evangelicals also knew that a Hillary Clinton presidency would mean



more pro-choice justices on the Supreme Court.

It is difficult to measure evangelicals' relative enthusiasm for Trump himself (it's hard enough to discern whether people in polls are actually evangelicals by belief or by practice). But Trump's provocative personality didn't end up having a major effect on the preferences of white evangelicals for the GOP, a pattern which had largely prevailed since 1952.

American Evangelicalism Is Not All There Is

The white American evangelical alliance with the Republican Party, then, is a longstanding one. Yet it is important to remember for other Americans who identify as "born again" or evangelical, including among African Americans and Hispanics, a vote for the GOP is hardly guaranteed. Political dynamics among evangelicals around the globe also vary widely from the American model.

The current American evangelical alignment reflects a relatively unusual political situation, one in which few evangelicals have ever found themselves. American evangelicals happen to live in a country where they can expect to have a major influence on national politics, for better or worse. Evangelicals (especially Pentecostals) play a somewhat similar role only in a few other countries today. Brazil, Nigeria, and South Korea are also places where evangelicals and/or Pentecostals make up a sizable portion of the voting population, and can wield significant electoral power if they vote as a bloc.

American politics cannot possibly define the global evangelical movement. Instead, evangelical Christianity revolves around beliefs and spiritual experiences that transcend national and political boundaries.

It is more common for self-identified evangelicals around the globe to represent a small percentage of a country's population, so that they can at most hope to be left alone by the government, and not be persecuted. For example, in Britain, evangelicals represent roughly 2 to 3% of the population. They tend not to think of any U.K. political party as their natural ally. There is virtually no public debate about the legal status of abortion in the U.K., and there are fewer galvanizing culture war issues that could produce a political fusion like the one between white American evangelicals and the GOP. Evangelicals in the U.K. were even divided over "Brexit" in 2016, with a small majority supporting the vote to remain in the European Union. If world evangelicals were all Trumpian Republicans-in-waiting, you might have expected British evangelicals to support the wave of populist nationalism that led to Brexit's victory.

Whatever we think about self-identified American evangelicals' connection to the Republican Party, in the rest of the

world the relationship between evangelicals and politics works differently. Most evangelicals around the world are not Republicans, because they're not Americans. Most evangelicals globally are also not white. If there is such a thing as "global evangelicalism"—and I think there is—the movement's connectedness must be rooted in other things besides American political alignments.

There definitely have been excesses in the American evangelical attachment to the Republican Party, but those excesses provide no legitimate reason to denounce the evangelical movement as a whole,

as critics in the U.S. have often done. At most, the problems with self-identified evangelicals and politics reflect the temptations inherent in access to political power.

But American politics cannot possibly define the global evangelical movement. Instead, evangelical Christianity revolves around beliefs and spiritual experiences that transcend national and political boundaries. Chief among these beliefs and experiences are a high view of the authority of Scripture, the need for all people to be born again, the "Great Commission" of missions and evangelism, and the tangible presence of God in one's daily life.

In America, one could get the impression that "evangelicals" are mostly white Republican voters who consider themselves religious. But that vague impression doesn't capture the historic, global essence of what it means to be an evangelical. ★

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SPEAKING FROM THE MARGINS

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY
IN A SECULAR CONTEXT

Ashlyn Portero

ON FRIDAY NIGHT IN CENTRAL LONDON, THE STREETS COME alive to a frenetic pace of activity. Digital boards flash brightly over historic buildings, advertising what's on for theater. A global mix of smells waft from food stalls and packed restaurants. Music fills the squares, every genre from Afro-Caribbean to a rousing British rendition of John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads." Bodies brush past one another as they hurry up and down the shopping streets—Regents, Oxford, Bond—bags in hand. Above ground and below, everyone is going somewhere, seeking after something, whether they know it or not.

London is a global city of roughly 9 million people, and on one particular Friday evening, I found myself with many of them in Leicester Square. I was headed to a work dinner with the Alliance for Transatlantic Theological Training, where I serve on the operations team. The crowds were so thick it felt like Christmastime. As I wove through the throngs of people toward the restaurant, I heard a man's voice amplified through a microphone above the noise of the crowds. He was evangelizing, telling the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I listened, my ears straining his words through biblical and theological filters. Was he sharing the truth? Yes. Was he corrupting it with hateful speech or false interpretations of the Bible? No. His proclamation was bold and passionate, but not angry; he acknowledged the reality of sin and called people to repentance, but he did not condemn. The last words I heard formed a question and an answer: "Will you receive God's love? In Christ, it is poured out for you."

Hundreds of pedestrians went along, seemingly unphased, as his words faded from our ears.

This is not so much an assessment of street evangelism, but a reflection on the passersby. As I continued on toward my destination, I couldn't get this scene out of my head. Here was this man, standing on the margins of society, speaking eternal truth into the whirlwind of the culture. People would catch only a soundbite as they moved quickly past him, but would they listen?

They need the whole story, I thought, and to know that their own stories—their eternities, their present lives, their very existences—are intertwined with and defined by the reality of Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and resurrected.

To minister in a post-Christian context is to attempt to pierce the bubble of noise in the Western world. The words of proclamation often are quickly received, translated, and filtered out; words like God, sin, hell, salvation, heaven, mercy, faith, truth, and even man and woman. People ascribe the meanings they want or toss them like relics of the past back into the storage of their minds, and carry on. How is it that Christians are to have any faithful witness in this kind of context?

More specifically, how are Christians to serve faithfully in the public square when the core convictions and motivations for service have been discarded, manipulated, or outright rejected by most of the public?

MOVING FORWARD WITH HELP FROM THE PAST

Sometimes, we find the help to move forward waiting for us in the past. The story of William Wilberforce, whose persistent advocacy through British Parliament was instrumental in bringing about abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, shines like a beacon of hope and direction for Christians seeking to live faithfully in secular culture and the public square. I have long been familiar with Wilberforce's legacy, but only several years ago did I learn of his ongoing correspondence with John Newton, the former slave trader who became a minister and wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace."

Newton faithfully encouraged Wilberforce throughout his career to maintain his Christian convictions and his place in Parliament—to let truth compel him to work for the good of his neighbors. Wilberforce and Newton advocated for abolition from the core place of Christian conviction, and while Wilberforce exerted influence through his seat in Parliament, he also spoke from the cultural margins in his own way.

In 1796, Wilberforce put forward a bill in Parliament to abolish the slave trade, but it failed to gain the votes needed

to pass in the House of Commons. It is said that a number of politicians whose votes could have pushed the bill through were not present at the reading because they were attending the opera that evening. Today in the West, we are no less tempted toward decadence while evil persists around us.

**WHEREVER WE ARE CALLED TO TESTIFY—
IN PUBLIC SPACES OR TO THE FRIENDS
AROUND OUR TABLES—WE CANNOT KEEP
QUIET ABOUT WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND
HEARD AND KNOW TO BE TRUE.**

The public square is certainly one place where Christians must engage with truth, love, and conviction, for the good of our neighbors. However, in a post-Christian context, our training ground must begin in the local church. In northwest London, members of my church, Redeemer Queen's Park, sometimes go out themselves into the streets to discern persons of peace, or people receptive to the message of the gospel (Matt. 10:11-13), and to offer them good news and prayer for whatever they might be enduring.

Life in the city is hard. It is lonely, ruthless, and cold. We are all strangers together, a friend said recently, and so members of our community try to close the distance between one another simply by offering kindness and encouragement, and also the most profound truth ever made known to us. It is not always received, but this is not for us to control or worry too much over.

The church, in this way and in others, speaks from the margins of society. Not many are coming to us, even though they are searching. So we must go to them. They do not know what to look for, just as we did not when our eyes were blind and our hearts were darkened to the truth.

As American culture rapidly progresses into a post-Christian ethos, it makes sense to brace ourselves and examine how things might be different. However, we know from history that Christians have been required to endure, to speak from the margins against seemingly impossible odds in which the world and its lusts for power and glory are highly favored. We also





know from history—not to mention the words of Jesus—that lukewarm Christianity never did anyone any favors. Our fight is not for relevance, but against the powers of darkness. And there is power in a historic faith.

Not too long ago, the novelist William Faulkner wrote, “the past is never dead, it’s not even past.” As Christians in a post-Christian world, this feels prophetic on multiple levels. The true stories of our faith live on into eternity, and they cannot die, because Christ has risen. The Word is alive, ruling and reigning. Culture has attempted to “move past” the truth, but it cannot, not really, because the truth belongs to the Alpha and Omega.

LIVING AND MINISTERING IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Even as we attempt to shed caricatures of the faith that are unhelpful and confusing at best and harmful and satanic at worst, we must ask God for grace that the true gospel, the living Word, would come to bear on our lives, and that it would shine through us into the darkness of the world.

There is no sense in being naive. The prince of the powers of the air is stalking around, seeking to cultivate chaos and darkness as the world spirals further down. Ministering faithfully in a post-Christian context means knowing where you stand, and not only accepting that but embracing it and asking God to work it for good. Not for worldly power or impressive influence, but for the kind of good that Matthew writes about in his Gospel, where good works are seen and God is glorified as a result. It can feel hopeless to pray and strive toward this vision. Will our works even be seen as good when the eyes that see them are blind? It is not for us to say or control this, for only God opens hearts and eyes.

In many ways, I am still learning what it means to live and minister in the post-Christian world. There is much to say in the way of practical methods and approaches the Church might take, and many who can speak with much more wisdom and experience than I have. What seems to me to be incredibly important for Christians to come to terms with is that we must speak. Wherever we are called to testify—in public spaces or to the friends around our tables—we cannot keep quiet about what we have seen and heard and know to be true.

This is a challenge that reverberates deeply within me, and many others. We must ask God how he would have us speak. But we must speak. Perhaps it will be to offer prayer from a portable coffee cart on an urban university campus. Perhaps it will be over a dinner table with a neighbor. Perhaps it will be through the public works we engage in vocationally. Perhaps it will be to a friend with questions, considerate of the deep doubts and longings we all work through in the course of our lives. These ways will not go unseen.

The post-Christian world is a dim place growing dark, but that is where light has always shone brightest. And so, perhaps learning to live faithfully in this type of culture also means learning to recognize—and repent—when you yourself have become jaded to the supernatural power of God while living in the midst. The remnants and influences of the most true story are there: in our songs, our art, our literature, our longings for peace and renewal and dignity. They are there in our quests for love. These are the things we are not yet past, and as image-bearers searching for our true home, God’s Word still has much to say to us. All we are called to do is to listen, and in turn, to be the feet that bring the good news of the gospel to others.

Jesus has promised that the gates of hell cannot overcome the growth of the Church, and this is not by our power, but through our faithfulness as the power of the Holy Spirit works among us and in us. So we can hope, and speak, and know that this hope and this message will not put us to shame. ★

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**AN INTERVIEW ABOUT WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD
CONSIDER RUNNING FOR AND WORKING IN PUBLIC OFFICE**

Lindsay Nicolet

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Seeking to serve the public while one's life is on public display, especially as a Christian, is not an easy decision, but it's a worthwhile one. And it is a choice that both DJ. Jordan, who ran for public office in Virginia and is the chief of staff for the Virginia Office of Attorney General, and Gov. Bill Lee, currently serving the state of Tennessee as the 50th governor, prayerfully made in order to help the communities around them. Government engagement can be complicated as partisanship and differences of opinions threaten to tempt public servants toward hostility and division. But the way of a Christian must be different. Below, Jordan and Lee reflect on the call to public service, the importance of loving our neighbors, and a Christian's motivation for both.



Lindsay Nicolet: What led you to decide to run for public office? Did you feel a specific calling toward it?

D.J. Jordan: I decided to run for office in 2019 because I felt called to be involved in government and public policy. I had

already served on Capitol Hill for about 10 years, but I wanted to be even more involved as a legislator. Public policy is something that I'm really passionate about. I love bringing people together to analyze situations and develop policy solutions to community problems.

Gov. Bill Lee: I had a wonderful life that really had nothing to do with politics or government. I ran a business. I had a beautiful family. I've been in the private sector all my life and very engaged in my church. But when I was about 40 years old, my first wife was killed in an accident. I had four little kids, and it really turned my life upside down. But God used it in a really powerful way to challenge me about my life going forward, how short life is, and how important it is that we live it well.

So I got really involved in nonprofit work, especially with my kids who went to Africa, Haiti, and Mexico. And I went to the Middle East and served people in very difficult circumstances and got a lot of purpose out of that. I also got involved in nonprofits close to home, worked in the inner city with at-risk youth and worked in prison reentry ministry with men coming back from incarceration.

Those close-to-home nonprofit efforts got me connected to public policy. I became very engaged in underprivileged or underserved children's educational issues, which led to an appointment on the Higher Education Commission. I got involved in this reentry work that got me appointed to a governor's task force on recidivism and sentencing reform. So I started having interactions with state government and functions of government that were very intriguing to me because they were around issues that I was passionate about.

That's what started the prayer that my [second] wife and I had about being engaged in public service. It came at a time in my life when I could do that. My children were grown, and my business was in a good spot, so we made a decision to pray

about it. In fact, I told my wife I was going to pray about it every day starting on Jan. 1 of that year. I would ask God to speak to me about whether or not I should do this. And we did. And God did. And we made the decision and ran for governor.

LN: What benefit can Christians, specifically, bring to public service? Why should we serve in public office?

DJ: Christians are called to be salt and light in the world, that includes every aspect of society, even public service. I think the characteristics of our faith should be conducive to successful public service. If we have more elected officials and government leaders who try to model the same humility, love, wisdom, and grace of Jesus, then the better our government will be overall.

GBL: As believers we are really compelled by God. We're challenged by God to love our neighbors as ourselves and to serve our neighbors. And to me, if we love our neighbors, then that means we're called to serve them. Everyone should take stock of how it is that they're serving their neighbors. It looks like a variety of ways. And I've often said your profession really doesn't determine how you best serve your neighbor. It's just whatever your profession is, wherever you spend your days, and however you spend your life that serving your neighbor is a possibility and is an obligation that we have.

So the reason that believers can and should be engaged in public service is because it's a great opportunity to serve your neighbors, as is being in the private sector and or working in nonprofits. They're all pathways. One of them doesn't have a higher calling than the other, in my view. I think it's just an opportunity to serve neighbors. I don't know if that's the [only] reason to get into public service, but if you have someone who has a particular interest in it, then it's certainly a way to serve.

LN: As a Christian, how do you advocate within your party? And how does it shape the way you interact with members of the opposite party?

DJ: The two-party political system is the system that we must work within, but it doesn't mean I like it. I really don't like the hyper-polarization and tribalism that our nation is experiencing right now, from both major parties. If Jesus lived as a human in America today, I don't think he would be a Republican or a Democrat. I think he'd be an Independent who challenges all parties and governments to a different standard.

LN: How does your faith make you different from a non-Christian in both political parties?

DJ: In many ways, I should have more commonality with a follower of Jesus from another political party. For a Christian, we can be united around our common faith and purpose. For example, we can look at

DJ: My faith is an important part of who I am. The convictions that I have, as a Christian, guide me in how I serve my wife, kids, and community, but also guide how I engage in politics. Because I believe that every person is created in the image of God, I believe every person is worthy of respect and value. I try to look at each person as God sees them, no matter if I agree with their politics or not.

John 13:34-34 says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The trait that should be most well-known among Christian government leaders is our love for people. Jesus did not say, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you judge one another, or if you show your Bible to one another." No. It's about how you love other people.

GBL: Every day Christians have a challenge to live according to how God calls us to

Christians. We're no different than they are. The fact is that we're broken, flawed, and have our weaknesses and our frailties, yet we're forgiven and made perfect in him. Nevertheless, to the rest of the world, we are walking along as flawed human beings, which is why I have often said the more public a person's life is as a believer, the more ardently we should pursue and think about the life of a believer on display.

Think about the fruit of the Spirit as outlined in Scripture. When you're walking in the Spirit, here's how it will be evidenced: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. If believers walked in the fruit of the Spirit in a very consistent and public way, how different would the political environment be in our country? I believe it would be substantially different. We all recognize we don't just pull up our bootstraps and start walking in the fruit of the Spirit. But as we walk in obedience, as we pursue the Lord, as we are truly committed to our personal relationship with him, then out of that flows the fruit of the Spirit.

If Christians are not walking in the Spirit, then there has to be a real question in their own self evaluation. Am I in fact walking closely with the Lord if the fruit of the Spirit is not a natural outflow of that walk? I oftentimes challenge myself to judge whether or not I'm bearing the fruit of the Spirit. For example, I ask myself, *in this interaction with these people, in this press conference, in standing before this group of people who may or may not agree with me, and in this public policy dialogue am I exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit?* It's something that I challenge myself with on a frequent basis. Regardless of if believers are in the public square or not, we should be challenged by that Scripture. But it's particularly valuable for those in the public arena.

LN: As an elected official or someone running for office, how do you keep in mind that politics is important but not ultimate—and not the end goal?



**THIS IS A TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE
PEOPLE. AND IF GOD IS CALLING YOU AND INSPIRING
YOU TO DO SO, IT IS A VERY WORTHWHILE ENDEAVOR.**

—GOV. BILL LEE

Isaiah 1:17 and want to seek justice, defend the oppressed, and take up the cause of the fatherless and discuss ways to work together on these goals. We may have different policy prescriptions but we can come together on solutions.

LN: What traits are important for Christians who serve in public office? And how can those be developed in the Christian life?

live—to be responsive, to be obedient, to live according to his principles. It's a challenge, and we all face that challenge every day—the struggle between our perfection that comes from the blood of Christ and our desire to be holy, which is a pursuit that each of us has. And it's particularly challenging in the public square because you are a public figure, so your life is on display.

And people who are not believers have perceptions about those of us who are



DJ: It's important to remember that Jesus should be Lord of every aspect of your life, including your involvement with politics. When you believe in a God who rules the universe, it helps put everything in perspective. If political success is your identity, it may bring you happiness, but it will also bring about great sorrow and embarrassment.

GBL: We should ask, is the kingdom of God and my obedience to that kingdom the most important thing in the world? God uses those most traumatic moments in our lives and makes them the most transformational. He's very good at that. He's a redeemer, and that's what he does. He takes the worst and uses it in a redemptive way. When my first wife was killed, it obviously was a very traumatic and challenging season for me. I had four kids. I was 40 years old. It just turned my whole life upside down.

But one of the things that I realized was, when one of the most important things in my life was taken from me, it made the reality of what matters and what doesn't matter much brighter. Suddenly, the things of Earth just didn't matter much anymore. When the most important thing on Earth is gone, then the things of Earth don't seem to have the importance that they used to. And the things of eternity

become much more evidently valuable. I think that we have to view everything in our life that way. Those moments where we're forced to are rare and difficult at times, but wonderful. But once we learn that lesson, I think you never forget it.

I find myself in this job frequently remembering that there are things more important than winning a political battle. There are things more important than getting a piece of legislation passed. And yet, it's all in the framework of valuable things on Earth. But the things on Earth fade away at some point. And to the extent that they are connected to things eternally, they're valuable. But even those diminish when considering what ultimately is the most valuable thing that was lost.

LN: Do you have any advice for a Christian who is praying about running for public office?

DJ: I would advise them to seek counsel from a group of wise and spiritual people. There is safety in much wise counsel. If you're having trouble discerning direction from God, it's helpful to have trusted people around you to discuss this decision. You want to have people around you that can keep you humble and grounded. If you don't have that type of support system and Christian friendships in your life, you're

missing out. If you decide to run for office, you'll definitely need that for encouragement, humility, and wisdom.

GBL: I think my encouragement for them would be that this is a tremendous opportunity to serve people. And it is a tremendous opportunity to serve people. And if God is calling you and inspiring you to do so, it is a very worthwhile endeavor. It is, however, like any pursuit, wrought with challenge and difficulty. It is not for the faint-hearted. And, in my view, it requires a very steadfast commitment that should be accompanied with a very strong desire to pursue God in the midst of what you're doing. It isn't easy, but it's incredibly worthwhile. And yet that can be said of being a stay-at-home mom, a schoolteacher, a physicist, a welder, or a holder of public office.

I don't hold this job at any higher calling or higher value in the kingdom of God than any other job. And that's the one thing that I would remind believers that are pursuing this. Sometimes the world around us puts people in influence and power on pedestals that are not particularly pedestals of the kingdom. In the world's eyes, it can be very attractive because it can look like a position of power and influence, which it actually can be. But that's no reason to pursue an endeavor. But if God calls someone to do that and wants to put that person in that position, because certainly God appoints leaders and people and authority, [remember] it is not a job more worthy or more holy than any other job, or even more effective for the kingdom. It's just another pathway that God uses us flawed people to make a difference in the world for the kingdom. ★

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D.J. Jordan is the chief of staff for the Virginia Office of Attorney General.

Bill Lee is a seventh-generation Tennessean and the 50th governor of Tennessee.

REPRESENTATIVES OF A *How the ERLC Advocates in Washington, D.C.* DIFFERENT KINGDOM

Chelsea Sobolik

Government is a God-ordained institution (Rom.13), and Christians have an important opportunity to shape public policies for the love of our neighbors and the common good. Because of what Scripture says, we know God cares deeply about the role and work of the government in society, and so should we. The opening verse of Romans 13 instructs Christians to be subject to the governing authorities, and also reminds Christians that there is no authority except from God. The verses following give guidance for how Christians ought to interact with and respect the institution of the government.

Advocacy is an effective way to get involved in the legislative process and the public square, and the ERLC regularly advocates before our government for issues Southern Baptists care about and believe in. An advocate is someone who “pleads the cause



of another” or “who defends a cause.” So, what types of policies should Christians care about and advocate for? Scripture is clear in multiple places that there is a particular group we should care about and defend—the vulnerable.

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8-9).

“Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 82:3-4).

“Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart” (Zech. 7:10).

“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him” (Prov. 14:31).

Our Areas of Advocacy

We speak to what the gospel demands of us and engage issues where we believe the Bible commands and when Southern Baptists speak. The biblical convictions we share with our brothers and sisters in local churches drive our advocacy, not partisan affiliation or political means. And we desire to bring a moral weight and Christian vision to each of the issues we address. It is paramount for our mission in the public square that we advocate for issues central to the gospel.

The ERLC’s advocacy is focused on the principle level. We believe there are some issues where the Bible draws a very clear line, such as issues of life and abortion. Scripture tells us that every person is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and is clear that the womb is God’s domain, and that his knowledge of the unborn even precedes the creative act of conception (Jer. 1:5; Ps. 139:13). As a result, we can make definitive statements and advocate for specific policies related to the issue of abortion.

There are other issues where the line isn’t quite as clear, but scriptural principles can still drive our advocacy. An example is the issue of immigration. Scripture doesn’t give us exact prescriptions for immigration policies like how many work visas are appropriate for a given fiscal year. What Scripture does give is clear guidance on how we should think about and treat our immigrant neighbors (Lev. 19:33-34; Jer. 7:5-7; Ezk. 47:22; Zech. 7:9-10). We should view them with dignity, and our policies should seek to keep families together and respect the God-given drive of people fleeing violence in search of a better life for themselves and their families.

Our advocacy is also directed by the annual SBC resolutions that the convention votes upon. Each year, the SBC passes



resolutions that cover a wide range of topics and help give guidance and direction to our work.

Five Key Areas of Advocacy

Our advocacy at the ERLC focuses on five key areas:

1. The ERLC promotes religious liberty as a biblical teaching because God alone is Lord of the conscience. We stand with our Baptist forefathers in defending the free exercise of faith for all people.
2. The ERLC navigates complex issues related to human dignity because every person is an image-bearer of God. We protect the most vulnerable among us, beginning with the unborn, carrying our pro-life ethic through every stage of life.
3. The ERLC believes marriage is an essential institution for human flourishing. We uphold God's design for marriage and family amidst related policy items.
4. The ERLC advocates for justice because the Bible teaches God is unequivocally just. We work to ensure impartial judgment and equitable treatment of the marginalized because we believe in a gospel that saves.
5. The ERLC's international work is focused on protecting the most vulnerable, such as the preborn, persecuted Christians and religious minorities, and vulnerable children.

What Does Our Advocacy Actually Look Like?

The public policy team of the ERLC closely monitors legislation and regulatory actions that fall into those five main areas. We advocate for good policies and against those which are harmful. On some issues, there is a wide-shared consensus and purpose, and on others, there is deep disagreement. As our public policy agenda says, "whether issues are currently popular or unpopular, we have the opportunity to bear witness, to seek to persuade, and to build the consensus needed to make change."



If there's an issue that we're advocating on, we discern which Congressional offices we should meet with. Since there are over 500 members of Congress, we can't meet with each office on each issue.

One of the ways we figure out which offices are most appropriate to meet with is by looking at which committees a member sits on. Legislation is marked up in a specific committee before it receives a full floor vote. During the markup meetings, members have the opportunity to offer amendments to the base text of a particular bill, strengthening the language, or helping remove harmful portions of a bill. Advocating before this process is an excellent way to go as upstream as possible. Other times, we'll advocate for bills that are receiving a full floor vote.

Capitol Hill staffers often have multiple issues in their portfolios, and we try to equip them with the resources they need in order to make policy recommendations to their bosses. So, when we have a meeting on Capitol Hill, we'll typically bring along a one-pager, which is a document that concisely communicates our biblical perspective.

As we meet with staff and members of Congress to advocate for issues, our goal is to make the case for why that issue matters to Southern Baptists, why the representative or senator should consider engaging the issue, and share our unique perspectives for policy solutions. By advocating on a policy, we play a role in equipping members and their staffers to think well about issues in the public square.

Faith and healthy democracy matter for our public policy work. For example, laws that protect the preborn are of little utility without a robust respect for the rule of law, even and especially those laws and processes that form the essence of our democracy. And so, in this time of upheaval, the ERLC is also focused on the health of our public square—cultivating convictional kindness, working for depolarization, and developing leaders who love those whom they lead enough to speak the truth and guide them down a better path. Policy can affect the lives of millions of people, both domestically and abroad. The ERLC seeks to represent Christ well within the public square and advocate for issues central to the gospel so that our neighbors will be able to flourish. ★

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**THE BIBLICAL
CONVICTIONS WE SHARE
WITH OUR BROTHERS
AND SISTERS IN LOCAL
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OR POLITICAL MEANS.**



FREE TO CHOOSE CHRIST

*Why the ERLC Advocates
for Religious Liberty for All*

Jordan Wootten

Last year, messengers to the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting voted to adopt a resolution on the Uyghur genocide, calling upon the Chinese Communist Party to immediately “restore to the Uyghur people their full God-given rights.”¹ While the resolution passed unanimously, there remain some who have questioned why Southern Baptists should advocate for groups like the Uyghurs, many of whom are followers of Islam. As Southern Baptists, our answer to this question is clearly stated in Article XVII of the Baptist Faith and Message—because religious liberty belongs to those who hold to “any form of religion” (emphasis added).²

If we believe, more broadly, that freedom—religious or otherwise—is a right endowed on all people, to what extent are we willing to act upon that belief on behalf of others? Are we willing to take what we affirm in the Baptist Faith and Message and apply it to all our neighbors, both here and abroad, when their religious freedom is being unjustly ignored or trampled upon?

*Why Does the ERLC Prioritize
Religious Liberty for All?*

We can’t answer these questions until we have addressed the more foundational question, “why?” Why should Southern

Baptists—or Christians generally—advocate for the freedom and just treatment of people of all religions or no religion at all?

Imago Dei

Why should we advocate for all people? First, because Christian anthropology begins in Genesis 1, where we learn that all people, without exception, are made in the image of God.

In his book, *Dwell: Life with God for the World*, Barry Jones says, “make sure your theological anthropology begins in Genesis 1 and not Genesis 3.”³ The first chapter of Genesis contains the creation account, where we learn of God’s power and humanity’s privileged status as those made in his image. In the third chapter, we witness humanity’s precipitous fall into sin, tarnishing (but not diminishing) that image and breaking everything else with one fateful bite of fruit. Both events are true, and both are seismically important.

Often, our assumptions about humanity, especially about those of different religious faiths, are firmly rooted in Genesis 3 and nowhere else. But our fallenness and depravity are only possible because there is something more fundamentally true about us: we are made in God’s image. That humanity is irrevocably made in God’s image means that we all possess certain fundamental rights. And as Southern Baptists we affirm that one of those rights is religious liberty, which is grounded in our understanding of soul freedom—the ability to choose whether or how each individual follows God.

The Ministry of Jesus

Secondly, we should advocate for people of all religions because the ministry of Jesus compels us to. Soul freedom is at the core of Jesus’ itinerant and ongoing ministry. In the New Testament, for example, Luke’s gospel transports us to a Nazarene synagogue

where we hear a sermonette Jesus delivered to a crowd of people. Kicking off his teaching, Jesus was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, from which he read:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to *proclaim release to the captives* and recovery of sight to the blind, to *set free the oppressed*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19, CSB, emphasis added).

At his coming, Jesus is saying, those held captive, imprisoned, and oppressed—both spiritually and physically—have the hope of being liberated by God's only begotten Son, who has come and announced an end to their enslavement. But Jesus didn't only *proclaim* release to the captives; he actually set them free. For example, in the region of the Gerasenes, Jesus introduced "the year of the Lord's favor" to a long-oppressed captive by freeing him (Luke 8:26–38). This man, seen as an "other" by the religious community, was set free from his spiritual and physical bondage by the eternal Word made flesh.

As those who have been released from spiritual captivity (Rom. 6:17, 2; Col. 1:13), we have been called to take up the ministry of Jesus and, through evangelism, *proclaim* release to the captives. But should we not also, through advocacy, work to *set free* those who are oppressed physically? This is central to the work of God's people, even on behalf of those whose beliefs fundamentally clash with our own. After all, religious liberty is not merely freedom from oppression, but the freedom to act in accordance with one's conscience. And because "God alone is Lord of the conscience," religious liberty for all is a right the church should affirm and insist that the state not infringe upon.⁴

Christians are Ambassadors for Christ

If Christ came to "proclaim release to the captives" and "to set free the oppressed"—to bestow liberty, in other words—then, as his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), we ought to go out on his behalf and carry on his work. This is why religious liberty is supremely important to the ERLC's work.

The ERLC is committed to advocating for this first freedom on behalf of all peoples. We have focused much of our attention on being a voice for the Uyghurs, a group enduring brutality at the hands of the Chinese government.⁵ Many of the Uyghur people have been subjected to reeducation camps, forced labor, and

even forced sterilization in women. We supported various pieces of legislation including the Uyghur Human Rights Protection Act and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and urged the United States government to issue an official determination that the CCP is committing genocide.

The ERLC was also a part of an amicus brief in the case of *Ramirez v. Collier*, which concerned the religious rights of a prison inmate in Texas. We asked the Supreme Court to protect the religious freedom of Ramirez, who was sentenced to die for his crime, and allow him to have his Southern Baptist pastor lay hands on and pray for him when he receives a lethal injection. On March 24, in an 8-1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ramirez

and affirmed that religious freedom does not end at the execution chamber door.

Likewise, we are standing firmly opposed to The Equality Act, a bill that would amend the 1964 Civil Rights Act to add sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes under federal civil rights law. The bill would curtail religious freedom protections, hinder the work of healthcare professionals and faith-based hospitals, undermine civil rights protections for women and girls, and ultimately

steamroll the consciences of millions of Americans.⁶

Religious liberty is essential because true faith cannot be coerced, nor should it be outlawed. Where soul freedom is not recognized by the state, the state is violating those made in the image of God and the freedom of its citizens. As ambassadors of Christ, then, we seek not to coerce or strongarm consciences, or permit the state to do so, but to advocate for their freedom and, by God's grace, make our appeal to those free consciences to be reconciled to their Lord.

And, like Jesus, our words are to be paired with action. May we be those who take Christ's good news to oppressed peoples here and abroad, working to set them free spiritually and physically, until the earth is "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). ★

Jordan Wootten serves as a News & Culture Channel Editor at the ERLC.

1 <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-uyghur-genocide/>

2 <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xvii-religious-liberty>

3 Barry Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

4 <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xvii-religious-liberty>

5 Oppression and the Olympics: What Christians Should Know About China's Human Right Atrocities, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffEQ463eGB8>

6 <https://erlc.com/equalityact/>

ALL ARE PRECIOUS IN HIS SIGHT

*How the ERLC Champions
the Dignity of Every Life*

Chelsea Sobolik

In the first pages of the Bible, we learn about God's good design for humanity and his intimate and intentional knowledge and care for human beings. We aren't left to wonder who we are or what our purpose is because Scripture immediately answers those questions. In the inaugural chapter of Genesis, God creates mankind, male and female, in his image. He then blesses them and instructs them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on earth" (1:26-28).

After God created humanity, Scripture tells us that he saw everything that he had made and it was *very good* (Gen. 1:31). Because men and women are created in God's image, we have inherent worth that is to be respected and protected. Whether or not we believe this sets the foundation for how we interact with our fellow neighbors. As theologian John Hammett has noted, ". . . a right understanding of our creation in the image of God is the strongest ground for human dignity, and a misunderstanding of it opens the door to devastating devaluations of humans and the diminishing of human dignity."¹

The Baptist Faith and Message summarizes the biblical revelation that every person is made in the image of God, and thus, is worthy of protection and dignity, regardless of age, level of ability, or stage of development: "The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love."²

How Has The ERLC Engaged On This Issue?

The ERLC has long advocated for all human life, especially the preborn. Every year, thousands of precious human lives are denied both personhood and protection because of abortion. We are working toward a day when abortion is not only illegal, but also unthinkable and unnecessary.



Pro-life Riders

One way we do this is by protecting pro-life riders in the Congressional Appropriations Process.³ The ERLC will work to preserve the Hyde Amendment not only because it prevents government-funded violence against preborn children, but also because it prevents the government from coercing citizens to act against their consciences in the taxpayer incentive.⁴ We are also working to protect other similar amendments: the Weldon (discrimination protections for those with objections to abortion), the Dornan (Hyde protections in the District of Columbia), the Helms (protection against funds being used for abortion in international aid), the Siljander (protection against funds being used to lobby for abortion internationally), and the Kamp-Kasten (protection against funds to organizations that support coercive abortion or sterilization).

The Mississippi Abortion Case

We are also preparing for a potentially post-Roe world. In December 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case titled *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. This case is an incredible opportunity to affirm life, shift abortion jurisprudence, and send the question of abortion back to the states. In the *Dobbs* case, the Supreme Court is reviewing a Mississippi law called the "Gestational Age Act" that prohibits abortions after 15 weeks' gestation, except in a medical emergency and in cases of severe fetal abnormality. This law replaces the "viability standard" created by Roe. The court is examining whether pre-viability restrictions on elective abortions are unconstitutional.

In *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court admitted that the state has a legitimate interest in protecting unborn human life. But it concluded that interest did not become compelling until viability, because at that point, the unborn child "has the capability of meaningful life outside the mother's womb." However, the choice of viability as the point before which a state may not



forbid abortion is entirely arbitrary. Even the author of *Roe* and two authors of *Casey's* three-justice plurality have admitted this. In 1992, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* expanded abortion access. When the “viability standard” was initially created in 1973, viability was around 28 weeks. It is now around 21 weeks. The viability line will keep moving as our modern medicine continues to improve. No Supreme Court decision has ever provided a principled justification for the viability standard.

The *Dobbs* case provides another chance for the court to overturn the viability standard and affirm a fundamental right to life. The ERLC joined an amicus brief in this case, asking the court to overturn those harmful precedents. In addition, we will work to ensure that abortion is unthinkable and unnecessary and that states are equipped to respond if and when abortion is sent back to the states.

Adoption and Foster Care

Additionally, we work to support adoption and foster care policies because every child deserves a safe, permanent, and loving home. While we are longing for a day when abortion will be illegal, unnecessary, and unthinkable, one of the sad realities is that there will likely be more children entering into the U.S. foster care system. There are currently 407,493 children in foster care, with approximately one-fourth of those children eligible for adoption. While foster care is largely governed at the state level,

**WE HAVE INHERENT WORTH
THAT IS TO BE RESPECTED
AND PROTECTED.**

there are certain policies on a federal level we are working on in order to ensure that vulnerable children are protected. For example, during the high of the COVID-19 pandemic, we advocated for Congress to place a moratorium on youth aging out in order to provide them safety and security so they can continue their current living arrangements and have the support they need.

Ways Christians Can Get Involved

The Baptist Faith and Message gives us this charge as we seek to care for our neighbor and uphold the dignity of every person: “In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.”⁶

The unchangeable truth that every human bears the image of God must affect how we think about, speak about, and treat our fellow human beings. Whenever and wherever human dignity is under assault, Christians should be the first ones to call it out and advocate to make things right in order to protect the vulnerable and uphold the inherent dignity, worth, and value of everyone—including those with whom we disagree.

God has told us who our neighbors are and how we are to care for them (Luke 10:29-37). Perhaps you’re wondering how the Lord is calling you to get involved in caring for the vulnerable among us. Spend time in prayer, asking for wisdom, discernment, and direction. We aren’t called to do everything or to bear every burden on our shoulders. Our job is to be faithful and obedient to how God is specifically and intentionally calling us to serve.

The ERLC will always advocate for life and human dignity before Congress, the courts, and in the public square. We are working and praying toward a day when abortion is both unnecessary and unthinkable and when the dignity of every individual is recognized and upheld. ★

Chelsea Sobolik serves as the director of Public Policy in the Washington, D.C., office of the ERLC.

1 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/where-does-the-idea-of-human-dignity-come-from/>
2 <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>
3 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/5-pro-life-riders-southern-baptists-should-know-about/>
4 <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/what-you-should-know-about-the-hyde-amendment/>
5 <https://erlc.com/what-you-should-know-about-supreme-court-decision-abortion/>
6 <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/91-744.ZO.html&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1649719940009558&usq=AOvVaw2IyArijzrz4069iPfdhXYH>
7 <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>



THE FOUNDATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Marriage and Family Advocacy for the Good of Society

Lindsay Nicolet and Chelsea Sobolik

Marriage and the family unit were established by God at the very beginning of creation as the first institutions. Genesis 1 and 2 shows us how God fashioned man and woman, brought them together as one flesh, and gave them the charge to be fruitful and multiply, or bear children. God works in many ways, but it's through marriage and family that some of his greatest blessings abound to the world and bring about flourishing.

The Bible is clear that children are chief among those blessings. Psalm 127:3 says, "Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward." Jesus, in a time when children were looked down upon, unashamedly welcomed them and pointed to them as an example of kingdom-followers (Matt. 19:14).

In Scripture, we also see that marriage as God has designed—"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:31)—gets the blessed distinction of being a picture of the union between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:32). And most importantly, through generations of imperfect families, from Abraham, to David, to Joseph and Mary, God brought the greatest blessing to every nation—the Savior of the world.

The Baptist Faith and Message affirms that "God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society." When we see the erosion of marriage and family as God has designed, we see the stability of a society suffer. In their landmark book *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones write, "It can be rightly said that marriage and the family are institutions under siege in our world today, and that with marriage and the family, our very civilization is in crisis" (15).

Areas of Marriage and Family Advocacy

Because the Bible is clear that marriage and family are creation ordinances and blessings from God, and because of the importance of these God-ordained institutions in preserving and prospering our society, the ERLC will continue to advocate for policies that maintain and protect these essential aspects of life together. God's ways are for our good, whether our culture recognizes this to be true.

While marriage and family will not be perfect in the midst of a fallen world, it's our responsibility as Christians to continue to champion God's design and see it upheld for the good of

our neighbor. Recently, many aspects of this particular area of advocacy have featured the protection and flourishing of children. Here are a few notable examples.

Support the Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act

While a husband and wife often welcome children biologically, families can also grow by bringing children home through adoption—a glorious picture of the gospel (Acts 7:21; Eph. 1:5). We want to make sure that some of our most vulnerable children, who are waiting for homes, are cared for and given a loving, stable family.

Across the country, child welfare and child protection systems are overcrowded and under significant strain. Unfortunately, it is in this context that some states and cities are working to close those child welfare providers who seek to operate in a manner consistent with their religious convictions. This leads to fewer families available for foster care and adoption.

The Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act would prohibit government discrimination against child welfare agencies on the basis of their beliefs, and ultimately protect children in the foster system and children waiting for adoption by ensuring that a wide range of child welfare providers are available to serve them.

Support Adoption and Foster Care Policies

The ERLC's defense of vulnerable children is woven through a wide variety of priorities, from religious liberty concerns involved in adoption to the effect the opioid crisis has on foster care as parents struggle with addiction. In addition to the Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act discussed above, we are exploring several policies aimed at promoting and supporting adoption and foster care in the United States.

Support the Adoptee Citizenship Act

Prior to the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, the administrative steps required of families adopting internationally were unnecessarily burdensome. The process included applying for and moving through a lengthy naturalization process for their children, in addition to the lengthy and costly adoption process.

The Child Citizenship Act of 2000 granted automatic citizenship to all foreign-born children brought to the United States who had at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen. Unfortunately, that act only applied to adoptees under the age of 18 when the bill was enacted, leaving an entire population of adopted children without full U.S. citizenship. The Adoptee Citizenship Act closes the loophole to provide immediate citizenship to these children already adopted by U.S. citizens yet left out of the previous bill.

Ensure Intercountry Adoption Remains a Viable Option

In 2018, 4,059 children were brought into U.S. families through intercountry adoption.¹ In 2019, only 2,971 children

were welcomed into families through intercountry adoption. The reasons for this decline vary, from certain countries completely halting their intercountry programs to other countries placing more children in homes domestically. There's also been a decline in stateside adoption agencies facilitating intercountry adoption, narrowing the options for prospective parents.

Many countries and cultures are becoming more open to domestic foster care and adoption. That is certainly good news,

WE WILL ADVOCATE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE FOR GOD'S DESIGN TO BE RECOGNIZED, PROTECTED, AND EMBRACED.

and ought to be encouraged. However, there are still millions of orphans worldwide who long to be raised in a family where they are known and loved instead of remaining a number in an impersonal institution.

Intercountry adoption must remain a viable option for welcoming those children into homes, and we must do all we can to facilitate those adoptions. In some countries, especially developing nations, the only chance a child might have at growing up in a safe, loving, permanent home is intercountry.

The ERLC is working with like-minded partners and the U.S. Department of State to ensure that intercountry adoption remains a viable option for families and vulnerable children around the world.

As cultural definitions of marriage and family continue to shift in our society, the ERLC will stand firm on the foundation of Scripture. We will advocate in the public square for God's design to be recognized, protected, and embraced. While marriage and family also point to the beautiful spiritual and eternal realities of the family of God, these institutions bring very real benefits that contribute to the health and flourishing of our civilization. And part of being salt and light in our world means that the ERLC will seek the welfare of our neighbors and the glory of God as we uphold his good design in a confused age. ★

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¹ <https://www.ccaainstitute.org/resources/fact-sheets>



AN ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE IN AN UNJUST WORLD

How the ERLC is Caring for Our Marginalized Neighbors

Hannah Daniel



Seeking justice and righteousness, especially for those who are most vulnerable, is fundamental to our faith and an essential part of Christian living. God directly commanded us to seek justice through the prophet Micah, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8 ESV).

The Biblical Call for Justice

Throughout Scripture, God calls his people to care for the vulnerable and to seek justice on behalf of our neighbors. As God gives the Law to the Israelites, he instructs them to care for the poor (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22), to welcome immigrants and refugees (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:33-34), and to be fair in their financial dealings (Lev. 19:35-36). The prophets carry on these themes of justice and often indict the people of Israel for their failure in this area. Isaiah directly admonishes the people that caring for and fair treatment of the vulnerable is an essential part of faithful worship.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go



before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard” (Isa. 58:6-8 ESV).

In the New Testament, Jesus says of those who are his sheep, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt. 25:35-36 CSB). Later, in James, we are instructed as to what true faith entails: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (1:27 ESV).

Areas of Advocacy

It is this clear mandate from God that both defines and motivates our advocacy for justice. Though injustice and tragedy run rampant in our fallen world, God’s people are to work for the good of our neighbors to push back the darkness and lift up the vulnerable. In our advocacy for fair and impartial judgment and equitable treatment of the unfairly marginalized, we bear witness to a God who is the ultimate just Judge, who deeply cares for the oppressed, and who proclaims a gospel that saves all who believe without partiality.

Immigrants and Refugees

Within our larger advocacy for immigration reforms that uphold ideals of dignity and fairness, the ERLC has strongly advocated for Dreamers, young immigrants who were brought to the United States by their parents, at no fault of their own. These Dreamers, who often have known no other home than the U.S., face continual uncertainty and potential future deportation unless Congress can deliver a solution allowing them to remain here legally.

Additionally, in recent years, the U.S. refugee resettlement program has been devastated, along with the network of non-profits and service providers that support resettlement. The U.S. has largely abdicated its role as a refuge to the vulnerable at a time of historic levels of refugees and internationally displaced people worldwide. The ERLC is deeply engaged in advocating for the rebuilding of this safe and legal program to restore our country’s legacy as a beacon of hope to those fleeing persecution.

Criminal Justice Reform

In 2018, the ERLC advocated heavily for the passage of the historic First Step Act, which worked to reduce recidivism in prisoners, prevented the shackling of most pregnant prisoners, and made other important steps toward a more compassionate criminal justice system that maintains public safety. Since then, the ERLC has continued to advocate for the RE-ENTER Act and the EQUAL (Eliminating a Quantifiably Unjust Application of the Law) Act.

The RE-ENTER Act would allow eligible individuals with federal convictions to apply for a certificate of rehabilitation from a district court, attesting to a law-abiding future and a commitment to successful reintegration into society. The EQUAL Act would remedy the disparity in federal sentencing for crack and powder cocaine related crimes that unjustly and disproportionately targets people of color.

Predatory Lending

Payday lending is the term used to describe the practice of lending small amounts of money to people for two-week periods, until their next payday. The average annual interest rates on these short-term loans is 391%, often leaving already impoverished families with crippling debts. These unjust lending practices are exploitative and predicated on consumer loss, trapping families in poverty. In response, the ERLC is advocating for the Veterans and Consumers Fair Credit Act that would extend the same lending protections currently established for Active Duty military members under the Military Lending Act to all consumers, including veterans and their families.

While Christians can have good-faith disagreements on the contours of our nation’s policies, the Bible is clear that all image-bearers are worthy of dignity and respect. As we face injustice in our world, indifference is not an option afforded to believers. God has called us to fervent prayer, advocacy, and service for all our neighbors. It is ultimately in this work that we will experience a taste of his kingdom on earth. ★

THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE, GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO CARE FOR THE VULNERABLE AND TO SEEK JUSTICE ON BEHALF OF OUR NEIGHBORS.

Hannah Daniel is a policy associate in the Washington, D.C., office of the ERLC.



WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Why We Advocate for Human Dignity on the International Stage

One of the blessings of the digital age is that we can connect with and find information regarding places all around the world, almost instantaneously. We can learn about cultures, customs, and the beauty of God's created order with a few short swipes on our phones or devices. Alongside these wonders, we can also learn about natural disasters, wars, crimes, and a host of other things as they happen. While there are many dangerous and deleterious effects to this level of information overload, Christians can also embrace certain aspects of our information age and leverage it for good, especially on the international stage.

One danger of this digital age is social media's ability to redirect our attention in unhelpful ways. Because of the endless amount of knowledge and the overall tone online, we sometimes become desensitized to world events, with one tragedy supplanting the previous one at breakneck speed, or enraged by what's going on nationally, all while forgetting the circumstances in our own backyard. Working for the good of our local communities is imperative—it is likely where we are able to make the most difference.

However, the necessity of working for our local good does not dismiss our responsibility to our international neighbors. Like the rich young ruler of the gospels, we must not seek to minimize who our neighbors are and congratulate ourselves for the attention paid only to what is most immediate to us. Rather, in a

Jason Thacker

global and interconnected world, we must ask what is required of us as we seek to fulfill the two great commands of Scripture: love God and love neighbor.

God's Word and Global Responsibility

Frequently, discussions of the breadth of the Christian's ethical responsibility devolve into unhelpful dichotomies. We either assume one must forsake our local communities in support of global issues or embrace a hyper-focus on local issues to the neglect or near abandonment of international affairs. These contrasts assume that Christians are unable to advocate for ethical behavior and a morally upright society on both fronts at the same time.

Some may criticize the simplicity of this point by saying that the debate is over which has priority for the believer. While this can be a helpful distinction at times, this does not mean that the Church should neglect one or the other, but prioritize when we have limited time, resources, and energies. For Christians, this must not be seen through a partisan lens or as competing concerns. The scriptures make clear that the priority of the Christian life is to first honor God as the Creator of all and to also love our neighbors—no matter their situation, perceived usefulness to society, or distance between us (Lev. 19:18b; Deut. 6:5; Luke 12:29-31).

A main theme throughout the biblical narrative is the centrality of the *imago Dei*, or image of God, as the very root of what it means to be human. This is the foundation of the Christian ethic—both personal and social. The structure of a God-honoring society will stand for the dignity and worth of all people, regardless of how politically expedient it may be at the time to trample upon or neglect those made in God’s image.

The command to love God and love neighbor by speaking truth in grace is at the very core of the Christian ethic and has ramifications not only in our local communities, but also for those made in God’s image around the world who experience the dehumanizing play for social control or who live under unjust conditions for which we may have the power and opportunity to intervene on their behalf.

This does not mean that Christians will agree on all the foreign policy particulars or the exact role of the state, but it does mean that we cannot limit our moral responsibility to love our neighbors simply to where and when it is convenient for us. We advocate and care for the most vulnerable among us, not out of a sense of power or duty but solely based on the fact that all people are made in the image of God and have an inherent right to be treated as such. The moral call on Christians in societies around the world must not be seen as an either/or but a both/and in terms of how we live out our calling both locally and globally.

Natural Law and the Pursuit of Justice

In a globalized world, discussions of human rights—right to life, freedom of speech, religious freedom—can become complicated as various cultures and customs overlap and compete with one another. While the West has often placed human rights at the center of the democratic order, this is not true of other states and rogue actors. However, Christians believe that the natural order of creation, and the intrinsic worth of each person, speak to the pressing issues of our day and inform our approach to advocacy on the international stage.

Central to Christian advocacy is the awareness that each person, by virtue of their humanity, has an internal sense of justice and dignity. As the apostle Paul relates in Romans 1-2, though we may suppress the truth, that does not negate the fact that we intrinsically know particular actions to be right and wrong. Abuses of human rights are one such area where we can make appeals across divergent cultures. This approach, drawing on natural law principles and scriptural revelation, recognizes that each person’s sense of justice is shaped and informed by their God-given conscience.

Even though authoritarian governments may desire to erase the moral guidelines and declare that the state’s might makes actions right, Christians can declare that there is a God who sees and will bring justice on all wrong doing. As we advocate on the international stage, we bear witness to this truth, and to the ability of all peoples to recognize that abuses of rights are attacks on the dignity of fellow image-bearers.

A Voice for the Persecuted

As Christians look to international affairs and standing with the vulnerable around the world, we appeal to the Word of God and the God-given conscience that transcends fluctuating moral attitudes in order to call others to action. Just over this recent year, the international community has witnessed an unjust war in Ukraine, revelations of the true extent of the genocide of the Rohingya minority by the Myanmar military, and massive refugee crises around the world. These clear examples of the utter

WE MUST ASK WHAT IS REQUIRED OF US AS WE SEEK TO FULFILL THE TWO GREAT COMMANDS OF SCRIPTURE: LOVE GOD AND LOVE NEIGHBOR.

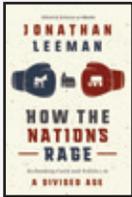
depravity of human nature become undeniable as we see so many of them unfold on our phones via social media and viral videos.

The ERLC has responded emphatically to the ongoing brutal genocide in Xingjang of the Uyghur people under the Chinese Communist Party. We hosted an online event prior to the 2021 Beijing Olympics that featured Nury Turkel, Vice Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and other panelists. We also sent a letter to NBC, urging them to be honest in the coverage of China. In addition, we advocated for the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and even sent a letter to Secretary of State Blinken urging its passage. Our advocacy against the Uyghur genocide will continue as we remain a voice for persecuted people.

Standing for human dignity and participating in global affairs need not, and truly must not, take away from our work in our local and national contexts. The Church advocates for justice and dignity throughout our societies, not because this will usher in some type of utopian social order but because this pursuit is in accordance with God himself. Dignity is not ours to assign, debate, or remove based on our political preferences or desires. Instead, in obedience to our Creator, it is ours to uphold, champion, proclaim—near and afar. ★

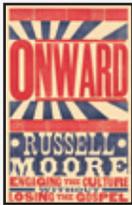
Jason Thacker serves as chair of research in technology ethics at the ERLC.

Thinking Well About Political Engagement



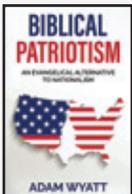
How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age
JONATHAN LEEMAN

Thomas Nelson, 2020



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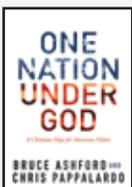
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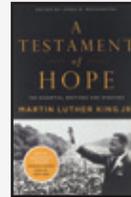
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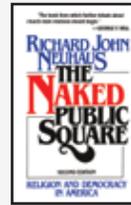
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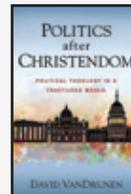
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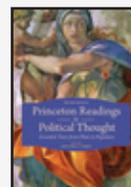
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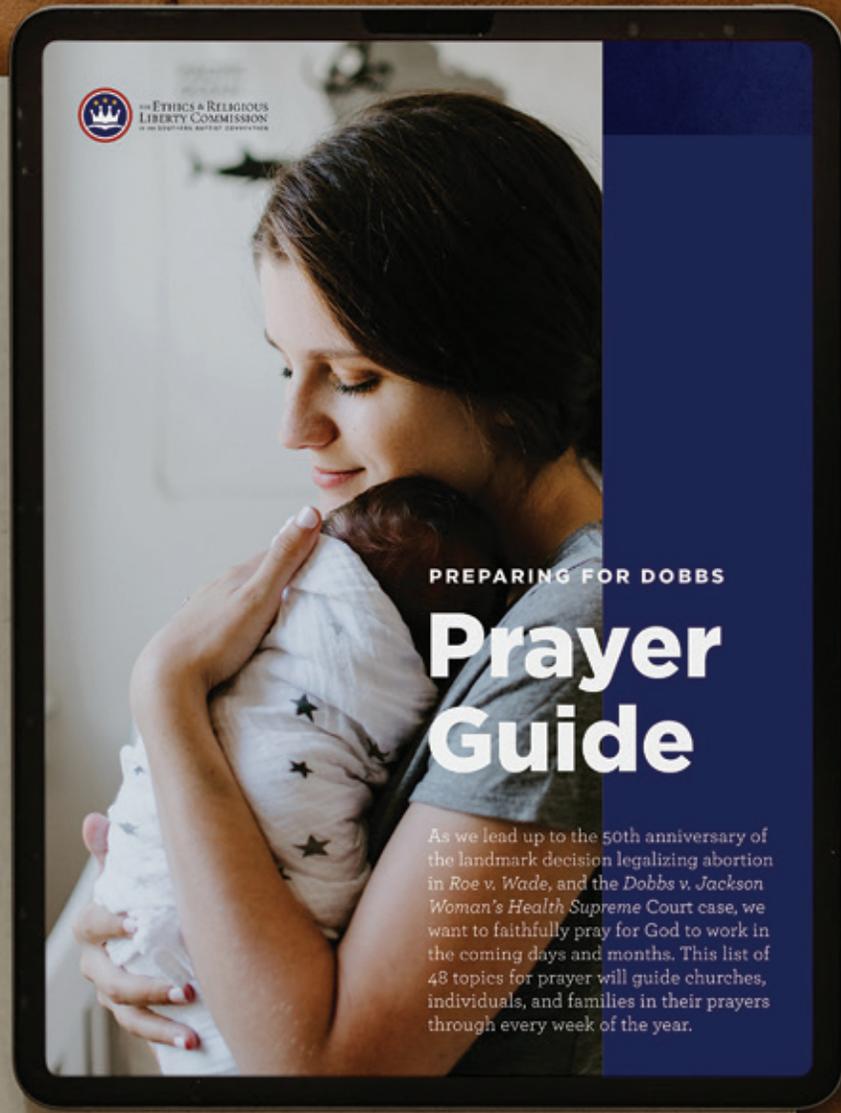


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