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## EVANGELICALS AND POLITICS: A Complicated Relationship

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From a supposedly singular starting point in the Scriptures and theological meditation, evangelicals have fostered a fractious public image, an image that is not entirely false. Much of this tension flows from the reality that evangelicalism is not a singular movement, but one born of consensus. Despite an ostensible unity when it comes to big picture issues, evangelical political action has been shaped by the functional absence of a centering point for the movement. It is not that there is no core principle uniting all the factions; it is that too often in their quest to fight the good fight on behalf of a good cause, evangelicals have missed the forest for the trees. It is in many ways a question of perspective. When evangelicals move their eyes from the transcendent to the immanent, the intrinsic tensions between their constituent parts and shared characteristics lead all too often to a contentious interaction, with and before the world.

This is a point which secular media outlets are keen to recall. Frankly, it would not be too much to say that this is what our neighbors know most about us. On October 24, 2021, Peter Wehner wrote in *The Atlantic*, “The root of the discord lies in the fact that many Christians have embraced the worst aspects of our culture and our politics.... The result is not only wounding the nation; it’s having a devastating impact on the Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> Just two days later, Ryan Burge in the *New York Times* added:

It used to be that when many people thought about evangelicalism, they conjured up an image of a fiery preacher imploring them to accept Jesus. Now the data indicate that more and more Americans are conflating evangelicalism

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wehner, “The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart,” *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/evangelical-trump-christians-politics/620469/>

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with Republicanism — and melding two forces to create a movement that is not entirely about politics or religion but power.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we may quibble with this or that element of these characterizations. After all, the conflation of politics and piety is hardly unique to conservatives, but it is fair to say that something feels not quite right in our political lives.

Mind you, this does not mean we know what to do about it. We may be quick to note the folly of trying to legislate morality, but we always manage to find exceptions when it comes to our own favored causes. Perhaps more precisely, we tend to describe others' social engagement as "politicizing the gospel," while our own attempts are "merely" applying biblical principles to the public square. How many pastors are keen to preach or march about *both* questions of racial injustice and poverty as well as issues related to abortion and biblical sexuality? No doubt there would be some we could identify who do both, but the fact that we have to think about it to come up with an example is rather telling.

We have seen, or maybe even participated in, rallies to "take America back for God," all under the assumption that God's special hand has been upon our nation and its special role in the world, all in a right-wing perspective.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, we have read in others or written ourselves from the progressive end of things calling on evangelicals to embrace "a new vision for faith and politics," rooted in "God's politics," a politics which just so happens to echo much of secular left-wing talking points.<sup>4</sup>

If evangelicals hailed from another theological tradition, or even a specific branch within our own, it might be easier to tread this twisting path. When we think of the "social gospel" of theological liberalism of a century ago, many of its progressive protégés in more recent days, or the politically engaged activists of the 1980s Religious Right, it is clear that the Christian life in such contexts is all but defined by political action. You are Christian only insofar as you act out this Christianity in a public setting. On the other hand, there are those at the opposite end of the spectrum

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<sup>2</sup>Ryan Burge, "Why Evangelical Is Becoming Another Word for Republican," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/opinion/evangelical-republican.html?referringSource=articleShare>

<sup>3</sup>Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup>Jim Wallis, *God's Politics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins), xv.

for whom the Christian life is purely an internal affair. What happens “out there” in the world is not nearly as weighty as what goes on in our hearts and our private actions. This is not to say that these emphases are somehow absent in the evangelical tool-kit. Instead, the intramural debates over politics abide with such intensity largely because, for evangelicals, these poles remain ever in tension with one another. Evangelicalism hinges, almost definitionally, on the insistence of making manifest the internal and spiritual elements of the Christian faith in the wider world of social action and politics, yet it does so from a set of often mutually exclusive priorities and beliefs.

### I. WHAT IS IN A NAME?

For the media and much of academic discourse, to study evangelicals is to study their place in politics. As noted above, it would not be too much to say that “evangelical” in the popular imagination is simply a socio-political designation – white, politically conservative, Protestant Americans driven primarily by the passions of the Cold and Culture wars. Granted, anyone who has studied evangelicalism beyond the headlines and the best-seller lists knows full well that this is a stereotype, and a shallow one at that. Evangelicalism is truly a global phenomenon, embracing multiple denominations, spanning centuries of history, and representing unknown numbers of tongues, tribes, and peoples of the world.

Yet, the fact that the monochromatic view of evangelicalism is a caricature in no way diminishes the ubiquity of this image in people’s minds, nor can it deny the elements of truth which lie beneath it. Consider this: in nearly every academic or media discussion of religion and politics, Anglo- and African Americans are treated as distinct entities, even if their theological principles are identical. We can (and should) complain about this. After all, why should whites be distinguished according to their own specific beliefs while African Americans are lumped together by race even if their doctrines are mutually exclusive? Not only does this obviously cast people into groups according to the color of their skin, but it radically ignores the significance of ideas and their consequences. Nevertheless, this distinction is not entirely an illusion. For all their common theology, there is a more than reasonable chance that any group of Anglo- and African American evangelicals will vote differently along racial lines, owing significantly to differing emphases about their shared beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup>Mary Beth Matthews, “The History of Black Evangelicals and American Politics,” *Black Perspectives*,

the popular association of “evangelical” with white conservatives is at the same time both unfair and fairly reasonable.

Even just among Anglos, not everyone who claims or is called by the name evangelical conforms to any semblance of a theological evangelical. Hence, we find at least some of the now (in)famous 81 percent of evangelicals who voted for a certain party in recent elections did not really hold to classical evangelical practices like church attendance or Bible reading.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, and at the other end of the political spectrum, we see others who were emphatically not a part of the 81 percent who downplay or even disregard other evangelical emphases like abortion or biblical sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Looking at these and similar statistics, one could be forgiven for wondering how many self-identified evangelicals even believe the *Evangel*.

This confusion of identity is almost innate to the evangelical experience. This allusion to “bipolar” sounds hyperbolic, but it points to something key, both for understanding evangelicals as a group and for how that group interacts politically. While we speak of a singular evangelicalism, and there is just cause for doing so, we must understand that at its core, evangelicalism is not a singular movement, but one born of consensus. Most obviously, this means that while commentators regularly speak of evangelical ideas, there is no temporal authority to define just what those ideas are. There is no Magisterium, no council, no bishop, nor, with the passing of Billy Graham in 2018, any acknowledged figurehead to whom the whole can look for clarification. Or, as BreakPoint host John Stonestreet has put it, there are evangelical churches but no Evangelical Church.<sup>8</sup> Formal institutions like the National Association of Evangelical and the Evangelical Theological Society or flagship publications like *Christianity Today* have, for some, served in that role from time to time. However, none of these *ad hoc* authorities change the reality that evangelicalism is a collection of distinct and occasionally contradictory organizations and emphases, united by a shared focus on internal piety and external activism. This lack of an organizing *telos* yields a movement with no center and little in the way of a clear trajectory yet driven by a passion to encourage

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March 30, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-history-of-black-evangelicals-and-american-politics/>

<sup>6</sup>Bonnie Kristian, “Are the 81 Percent Evangelicals?” *Christianity Today*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-february/evangelicals-evangelicalism-politics-eighty-one-percent.html>.

<sup>7</sup>Alex Samuels, “White, Evangelical . . . And Progressive,” *FiveThirtyEight*, September 30, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/white-evangelical-and-progressive/>

<sup>8</sup>Personal communication.

changed people to change the world.

## II. THE CONTEXT

Evangelical political practice did not emerge in a vacuum. This is a truism. It is also something that is too often ignored in analyses of the movement. For a great many contemporary scholars, the only things that seem to matter in discussing the issue are the factors which are equally contemporary. The historical and philosophical background takes a back seat to purely sociological, racial, and gender power dynamics of only the last generation or two. Even if it is simpler to look at evangelicalism's political activity as driven by a fascination with certain movie stars or purity culture, when it comes to movements embracing millions of people, Ockham's razor is reversed; the more multifaceted answer is more often true. It is not a question of ignoring the sociological influences on evangelicalism but, instead, of widening our perspective to include a wider swath of the story.

One of the most obvious elements of evangelical thought is the centrality of personal piety. All in all, this is a good thing. We can think of the English influence of Wycliffe and Tyndale on translating the Bible into native tongues and Luther's dramatic "Here I stand" moment at Worms. Evangelicalism has always insisted on a world where butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers possessed as much access to God as any prince or priest. Similarly, the continental ideas of Pietists like Philipp Jakob Spener and Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians imparted to later evangelicalism an insistence on the inner life and personal application of theological themes. These principles crafted an evangelicalism which connected the personal and the public. In the best of times, this meant a holistic approach to life, a perspective where the individual could not hide from the implications of Christianity in the common square. When devolved from original goals, this brought an atomistic and individualistic subjectivity to public affairs, a fact that continues to afflict us.

Another factor is the cross-denominational element in evangelical practice, and this goes back to its immediate antecedents. The English Civil Wars provide an unexpected bit of foreshadowing. During that conflict, the Parliamentary Army was a hodgepodge of theological systems.<sup>9</sup> As the war

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<sup>9</sup>"Cromwell had openly espoused the principle of religious toleration and was rapidly drawing the Independents and Baptists under his masterful influence. The general's army was a hotbed of zealous sectarianism, and the vigour and competence of his leadership drew men to him like a magnet." W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England: From the Convention*

wore on, and commanding officers were replaced; instead of only Anglican and Presbyterian chaplains, the New Model Army increasingly diversified. As notable Reformed pastor Richard Baxter put it, “Independency and Anabaptistry were most prevalent; Antinomianism and Arminianism were equally distributed.”<sup>10</sup> While these chaplains were too early, historically speaking, to be considered evangelicals in the contemporary sense, we could term this ecumenicity an example of proto-evangelicalism, as pastors from distinct denominations worked together on a common cause while keeping their theological distinctives in tow. This is something that would become a hallmark of evangelical practice a century later in the Awakenings of the 1700s,<sup>11</sup> and would continue to define evangelicalism down to the present.

A third set of influences on evangelicalism deals with first principles. We may agree on certain issues, but we often approach them from widely divergent presuppositions. Take for example the questions of religious liberty. For those in the Baptist line, liberty of conscience is near and dear to their hearts. Likewise, those coming from a more Reformed/Kuyperian stream have such freedom at the forefront of their political theory. However, despite this common ground, their respective emphases and rationale are almost contradictory. For the former, liberty is a positive good, a blessing from God to each individual upon which the state cannot infringe.<sup>12</sup> For the latter, however, the focus is more on the negative; it is not so much that people have the right to think what they wish as much as it is that the state lacks the authority to dictate beyond its sphere.<sup>13</sup>

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*of the Long Parliament to the Restoration, 1640-1660* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 65.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Baxter, quoted in Anne Laurence, *Parliamentary Army Chaplains: 1642-1651* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1990), 79. Baxter was not a fan of this multid denominational activity. As he put it, “And when the Court News-book told the World of Swarms of Anabaptists in our Armies, we thought it had been a meer lye, because it was not so with us, nor in any of the Garrison or County-Forces about us.” Laurence, 79.

<sup>11</sup>Douglas Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: The History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 30.

<sup>12</sup>“That it is the will, and mind of God (in these Gospel times) that all men should have the free liberty of their own Consciences in matters of Religion, or Worship, without the least oppression, or persecution, as simply upon that account; and that for any in Authority otherwise to act, we confidently believe is expressly contrary to the mind of Christ.” *The Standard Confession of 1660*, Article 24, [https://www.nobts.edu/baptist-center-theology/confessions/Standard\\_Confession\\_1660.pdf](https://www.nobts.edu/baptist-center-theology/confessions/Standard_Confession_1660.pdf).

<sup>13</sup>“Every State-formation, every assertion of the power of the magistrate, every mechanical means of compelling order and of guaranteeing a safe course of life is therefore always something unnatural; something against which the deeper aspirations of our nature rebel; and which, on this very account, may become the source both of a dreadful abuse of power, on the part of those who exercise it, and of a continuous revolt on the part of the multitude. Thus originated the battle of

### III. HOW WE GOT HERE

In the last century or so, evangelical political engagement has been in for a wild ride. Granted, this must be an abbreviated century of around eighty years since before that time those holding to evangelical beliefs were normally categorized as fundamentalist. While the backstory is quite complicated, a strong case can be made that evangelical politics, in the modern sense, began in the Second World War with the drive to break the mainline monopoly on military chaplains.<sup>14</sup> Before this time, those with theologically conservative beliefs had been significantly sidelined in the denominational battles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, while this point is often exaggerated, there was an element of fundamentalist thought that shied away from the public square. To be precise, the public action by conservative Christians in those days (and now) was more centered on private initiatives at the local level, the sorts of things that get overshadowed in the history books when compared to government actions like FDR's New Deal.

During the conflict with Germany and Japan, evangelicals were wholeheartedly supportive of the war effort, though they often voiced disapproval of the state's indifference to moral concerns and offered occasional critiques about progress and policy of the war. Once peace had returned, evangelicals emerged with a strong voice. Part of this was simply due to the growing prominence of the movement with the rise of Billy Graham, but part was a renewed emphasis on engaging the culture. We see in 1952 Francis Schaeffer writing to President Truman about the latter's cooperation with the Vatican to oppose Communism.<sup>15</sup> Carl F. H. Henry had a similar complaint just a few months earlier when, in a letter to a local paper, he chided the Truman administration for its moves to appoint an envoy to the Vatican.<sup>16</sup> For the 1950s and 1960s, with certain exceptions, political activity remained largely a matter of proclamations rather than overt involvement in the process. And, as can be seen from the examples above,

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the ages between Authority and Liberty, and in this battle it was the very innate thirst for liberty which proved itself the God-ordained means to bridle the authority wheresoever it degenerated into despotism." Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures of 1898* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 78.

<sup>14</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco: Word, 1986), 105.

<sup>15</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, Letter to President Harry S. Truman, November 19, 1951, Francis A. Schaeffer Collection, Box 57, File 23, The Library, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC.

<sup>16</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, Letter to the Editor of *Pasadena Star-News*, November 7, 1951, Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Box 1951 1, File Protestants and other Americans for the Separation of Church and State, Roling Library Archives, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.



evangelical commentary was hardly partisan at this point but centered on issues of specifically religious or moral natures. Now, “moral” was not just shorthand for “personal piety.” Evangelicals were highly concerned with the social order, but they did not call for action as much as they declared what was right. This declarative engagement continued even as the Civil Rights movement and the Cold War gained steam. When evangelical outlets like *Moody Monthly* or *Christianity Today* spoke out about segregation, they tended to challenge people to consider their ways instead of calling on them to vote in a certain way.<sup>17</sup> When they talked about the menace of global Communism, they did not play to the chauvinism of America versus the world but the gross immorality and oppression of Marxist tyranny.<sup>18</sup> With a high-level moral perspective leading the way, evangelicals managed to engage, even at a discrete distance, the political realm without getting bogged down in the muck and mire of partisanship. What is more, they could and did praise their nation for its qualities while also calling it out for its failings,<sup>19</sup> with language that was a far cry from America as God’s chosen land.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>“And BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this convention exhort every Bible-believing Christian to foster in every reasonable and Christian way the full participation of every group in the advantages of Christian culture, including equal opportunities in the means of grace, of education, in wages, in housing, and in free enterprise; And finally, BE IT RESOLVED that this convention repudiate as unChristian, unwelcome guardianship of one group by another on the basis of racial or ethnic distinctions.” Press Release, National Association of Evangelicals, Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Box 1951 2, File NAE Committee on Social Action, Rolfling Library Archives, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. Emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup>“But shame on us Christians who have not realized that the Communist system will naturally and inevitably bring forth oppression, because, in a materialistic view, there is no basis why the human being has any unique intrinsic value ... the individual has no unique, intrinsic value, and there will be oppression, because he or she is only considered as expendably useful for the collective of the state and for the elite which has absolute control of that state. Are we shocked with Stalin’s millions that he killed? Are we shocked with Mao’s probably killing more than Stalin and Hitler put together? We should not have been shocked, we should have been overwhelmed with tears and with fury, but not surprised.” Francis A. Schaeffer, “The Responsibility of Free Christians in the Soviet Bloc,” Speech given to the Christian Rescue Effort for the Emancipation of Dissidents, October 29, 1981. Emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup>“Whatever the outcome of this struggle, Christians all over America must approach the problem penitently, aware that the existence of the problem is the fault, not of the Negro, but of the white man who brought him to America against his will and as chattel property. Amends for the wrongs done the Negro in the first place should loom large in the thinking of Christians who believe in justice and righteousness.” Harold Lindsell, “The Bible and Race Relations,” *Eternity* (August 1956): 12.

<sup>20</sup>“The vast majority of Americans today may believe in a ghost god, in a phantom god, in a god who makes very little difference in the great decisions of life and even less in the cares of everyday existence.... These must be non-Christian gods, non-biblical gods, gods who have little in common with the gods of our fathers which many of these 99% of the Americans worship.” Carl F. H. October 17, 1952, Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Box “Let the Chips Fall,” Rolfling Library Archives, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

This, however, was not to last. After around 1970, a fracturing occurred within evangelical ranks. It is not that they stopped seeking political change or making moral claims in the public square. Instead, these claims bifurcated. Increasingly, with the rise of the Evangelical Left and, later, the Religious Right, the evangelical voice on politics became increasingly partisan, with each side claiming to be the authentic and prophetic voice in the land. More and more, despite many protestations to the contrary, evangelicals began identifying with one of the two major parties. Clearly, most evangelicals found themselves more at home with the Republicans; there is a reason why David Swartz's book, *Moral Minority* has the title it does and Jim Wallis's *Post-American/Sojourners* embraced its "outsider" role.<sup>21</sup> Those on the left looked at their fellow believers' inaction and complicity with segregation and found that they had more in common with others of lesser orthodoxy but, by their count, greater morality regarding the dignity of human beings. Those on the right looked at their coreligionists' apathy and occasional endorsement of Communism's tyranny and discovered that they could oppose oppression just as comfortably with nonbelievers as with their own kind.

It is no coincidence that this split became more apparent even as the evangelical movement as a whole became more prominent in the popular consciousness. The year 1976 saw "The Year of the Evangelical"<sup>22</sup> and the election of the first self-proclaimed evangelical to the presidency. In 1926, evangelicals were still, at least in the public imagination, reeling from the Scopes Trial the year before. In 1946, they were just coming together as a recognizable entity, distinct from both Modernists and fundamentalists. By 1976, they had grown to the point that, one, it was now "cool" to be an evangelical, and two, the movement was large enough that the left-leaning and right-leaning could experience an ideological mitosis of sorts, forming distinct communities under the evangelical banner. Instead of seeing their coreligionists as primary partners for social reform, evangelicals increasingly found allies among secular cobelligerents who shared

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<sup>21</sup>Yet not everyone was wholly on board with the new partisan alignment. In a letter to Billy Graham, Carl F. H. Henry acknowledged the co-belligerency with the Republicans like President Nixon but insisted that this was born of common temporal causes and not shared theology. "[T]here is always the risk of seeming to confer approval on Nixon politics, and thus equating evangelical political action as such with a particular program which in essence—although it [illegible] the errors of leftist politics—is simply secular right, and lacks evangelical ingredients no less than its alternatives." Carl F. H. Henry, Letter to Billy Graham, August 1, 1970, Box 1970 3, File Correspondence—Graham, Billy, Carl F. H. Henry Collection, Rolffing Library, Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL. The illegible word is possibly "avoid."

<sup>22</sup>David Kucharsky, "The Year of the Evangelical," *Christianity Today* (October 22, 1976): 73.

their political vision and party.

The next two decades saw evangelical political prominence rise ever higher. They became a key constituency in Reagan's 1980 and 1984 elections, and, even if they felt less at home with the patrician George H. W. Bush,<sup>23</sup> they arguably had more say in his administration. The Clinton years brought great consternation to evangelicals, both by those concerned over his policies<sup>24</sup> and by those having to reassure fellow believers that the President was not, in fact, the Antichrist.<sup>25</sup> In George W. Bush, evangelicals found a hero, someone who spoke for and like them, even as he found his voice in the rubble of 9/11.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it was arguably in his time in office that evangelicals entered a new stage, in fact, a new instability. A generation of believers had grown up in a world where the GOP was clearly on the side of God, if not the other way around. Seeing their fathers vote in lockstep for the Republican party led the rising cohort of evangelicals to find hope by moving lockstep in the opposite direction. Now, instead of risking moral compromise by associating too closely with the right-wing of the nation, they now got rather cozy with the left and voted for President Obama in good conscience. By the elections of 2016 and 2020, the fissures in the movement were profound. The majority of evangelicals continued to side with political conservatism,<sup>27</sup> but a vocal minority could no longer countenance this association. In today's world, the loudest voices on each side of an increasing chasm cannot fathom how the other side sleeps at night, and each faction sees the other as wholly captive to an unholy alliance with the world. Even as the polarizing figure of President Trump recedes into history, the fissures exacerbated in recent years continue to define much of evangelical political discourse, to the point that one's political affiliation is often a more potent indicator of identity and association than theological contentions.

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<sup>23</sup>Lyn Cryderman, "Am-Bushed?" *Christianity Today* (September 24, 1990): 16-17.

<sup>24</sup>The Editors, "20 Years After Roe..." *Christianity Today* (January 11, 1993): 36.

<sup>25</sup>Philip Yancey, "Why Clinton is Not Antichrist," *Christianity Today* (August 16, 1993): 72.

<sup>26</sup>"Girding for a new kind of war, Mr. Bush seemed like a new kind of president. His speech before a joint session of Congress galvanized and energized the nation." Bob Jones IV, "Reload and Reset," *World*, 20 October 2001, 21-22. Even the left-leaning *Sojourners* spoke highly of Bush, seeing in his coalition-building in the autumn of 2001 a chance to rein in American adventurism. Jim Wallis, "A Light in the Darkness," *Sojourners*, November/December 2001, 8. Granted, this generosity changed very soon, particularly after the President moved his coalition not only into Afghanistan, but into Iraq.

<sup>27</sup>Even if the 81 percent is not as accurate as headlines like it to be, there is little question that most evangelicals continue to vote for the Republican party.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM

Part of the problem is that we cannot do nothing. In the contemporary United States, there are political implications related to our historical moment that are, after a fashion, unique.<sup>28</sup> After all, if you were a first- or second-century Christian, you might have certain ideas about how the Roman Empire should be run, but, since there would be precious little you could do about it, in practical terms, these ideas could well be reduced to, “Try not to get eaten by the lions.” Even in the centuries which followed the Edict of Milan, unless you happened to be of noble birth or an adviser to those who were, your political opinions as an ordinary believer mattered little. Today, on the other hand, Christians living in the West in general and America in particular have both other opportunities as well as newer responsibilities as voters in a democratic society. As a citizen and not just a subject, an American Christian has a voice in the affairs of state about which earlier believers could only dream.

For all the proactive nature of an American citizen’s role in today’s society, the overarching concerns for the follower of Christ remain the same. How do we balance our temporal allegiance to the land of our natural birth with our ultimate loyalty to the hope of our new birth? The problems surrounding evangelicals’ involvement in politics are, in many ways, simply exacerbated versions of the issues facing Christians from all eras. Are we to remain above the fray with thoughts of God’s kingdom being not of this world, or are we to become involved in the mess of life and love our neighbors by seeking the welfare of the city? Do we, like many in the early church, the Anabaptists, or more recent end times enthusiasts see ourselves as sojourners and pilgrims who are just passing through towards a greater tomorrow, or do we look to the state’s role as minister of God to preserve the peace for today?

For Americans, this tension is exacerbated by several distinct and almost unique factors. Citizens of the Land of the Free are possessed of an endemic spirit of chosen-ness. Some will go so far as to declare the United States to be a covenant nation, a New Israel, in special relationship to God, but even those who deny this in principle cannot easily escape in practice the founding myths of our forebearers. Whether we see America as uniquely good or especially evil, Americans are keen to view their nation as being under the particular gaze of God, whitewashing its failures to the point

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<sup>28</sup>Parts of this section are adapted from the introduction to my *Dual Citizens: Politics and American Evangelicalism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020).

of innocence or highlighting them as viler than the evils of others.

With political parties, this becomes even more exaggerated. We can temper our patriotism in the knowledge that our citizenship is an accident of birth, but the voluntary nature of political parties allows pride to invest and infest our membership with a sense of superiority. It is not our inner selves alone who push us along this way. Whether appealing to the millions of believers in their midst or looking to a quasi-Christian foundation, few partisan announcements can resist the call to connect a given election year's priorities to the eternal will of the God of the Bible. We may claim that Jesus is not a Republican or a Democrat, but we have trouble imagining that he is not whichever one we happen to be.

This perspectival thinking plays out among "professional" evangelical commentary as well. In December 1989, even as the last echoes of the Cold War faded into the history books, the United States went to war in Panama. It was not much of a war, ending as it did in a matter of days, if not hours. It was a straightforward campaign – the Americans rid themselves of thorn in their side, Panamanian strongman, Manuel Noriega. However, this simplicity did not yield unanimity when it came to evangelical perceptions. The evangelical left journal, *Sojourners*, blasted the fighting as needless interventionism born of American imperial ambition,<sup>29</sup> and wrote of American troops robbing from local people.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the decidedly more conservative *World* magazine highlighted the support for the invasion found among the Panamanian people,<sup>31</sup> and shared photos of local children playing with GIs.<sup>32</sup> How can both these images be true? Americans as unwelcome bullies or long-expected liberators? The temptation here is to assume some kind of malfeasance, that one or the other of these periodicals fabricated or willfully misconstrued the situation. The far more likely and less dramatic option is that each group of writers and editors chose from among a host of true facts those elements which best conformed to what they thought their audience most needed to hear.

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<sup>29</sup>Danny Duncan Collum, "Under Bush's Thumb," *Sojourners* (April 1990): 4.

<sup>30</sup>Brian Jaudon, "Just Cause I," *Sojourners* (July 1990): 32.

<sup>31</sup>The Editors, "Occupying Panama," 7.

<sup>32</sup>The Editors, "With New Stability, Missionaries Want to Seize Day in Panama," *World* 20 (January 1990): 17.

## V. TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Part of the evangelical problem with politics has nothing to do with evangelicals, or even with politics. The abbreviated nature of Twitter and Facebook amplify and enhance already simmering conflicts. We would like to blame social media with its limited space for nuance, its faceless interactions, its red and blue feeds, but there is more going on than outrage algorithms. There is a personal element involved. It is just too easy to create ideological silos where we can tailor the information we receive to what we want to hear. Unlike past years where there were only a handful of truly national papers or TV networks, the overwhelming number of choices available makes it impossible to absorb them all. Then, with human nature being what it is, we inevitably self-select those options which reflect our own preconceptions of the world. With this kind of context, it is easy to feel trapped by the blaring cacophony around us.

Then there is the common burden of postmodernism. We live in a culture that is constantly crying that life has no meaning and truth is unknowable. Society insists on a sort of epistemological libertarianism, where no one can tell another what is right, beautiful, or true. The most educated and morally conscious around us demand that there is no basis for morality. Yet, who can live like that? Our human need for identity and purpose and our God-given understanding that right and wrong are real combines with a philosophical system intent on meaninglessness, creating a rancorous rhetorical world where calls for political justice are both absolute and arbitrary.

Nonetheless, evangelicalism's political travails are not fundamentally technological or philosophical. These things affect and afflict us, indeed, but our fundamental problem is theological. Perhaps it would be better put as theologically teleological. Put simply, evangelicals have lost their way. Now, given human frailty, there is no way to achieve full unanimity on all issues, but that hardly entails that genuine progress is impossible. The questions of subjectivity, denominationalism, and ideological variance unique to evangelicalism, as well as the contemporary concerns over partisanship, social media, and postmodernism are mitigated if not sidelined in light of a transcendent orientation. We need something bigger, better, and higher than our own passing partisan priorities if we wish to be of service to God and a blessing to his world. By becoming unmoored from the Evangel, from the divinely privileged vantage point rooted in God's Word, evangelicals forfeited their greatest strength. And it is only

by restoring the Evangel to the center of evangelical politics that we can hope to restore our role in helping to make all things new. To borrow from C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, we have forgotten to seek the signs. Is it any wonder that we have lost our way? Or, to use a biblical example, if we, like Peter, take our eyes off the source of our strength, can we be shocked that the waves threaten to undo us?

