



FAITH AND HEALTHY DEMOCRACY

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In June 2017 a gunman opened fire on a group of Republican Congressmen, nearly killing one. Just over a year later, several pipe bombs were mailed to prominent Democratic officials, including former President Barack Obama. In recent years Americans have attacked and killed fellow Americans at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, a gay nightclub in Orlando, and a church in Charleston because of political, religious, or ethnic differences. In June 2018, 31 percent of respondents in a Rasmussen poll believed civil war was likely to break out within the next five years.¹

These sporadic incidents of political violence are still thankfully rare, and civil war is unlikely. But the violence is a warning sign, a dramatic indicator of a broader breakdown in the American public square—in how Americans perceive their neighbors, their government, and their opportunities for civic engagement. The American public square, as our interviewees unanimously told us, is caustic, toxic, ignorant, and corrosive. The level of polarization, mistrust, and tribal animus is not unprecedented in American history—the 1790s, 1860s, and 1960s were worse—but the 2010s rank close to those decades as among the least flattering to the aspirations of American democracy. We hate our politicians, and we hate each other.

Some observers warn that democracy cannot survive a wholesale loss of faith in one another, in public persuasion, and in the rules of democratic politics. That conclusion might be overdrawn—the United States did, in fact, survive the 1790s and 1960s (and, barely, the 1860s)—but it is also unnecessary. We do not have to believe that democracy is on its last legs to want it to see better days. It is enough that something is wrong for us to see a duty to put it right. Waiting for an apocalyptic crisis is a dereliction of the duties of citizenship, a form of national procrastination that is both cause and evidence of the state of the public square. Christians can and should desire a better public square, and we can and should bear public witness for that goal. Christians are called to love our neighbors; we are called to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” in which we sojourn (Jeremiah 29:7); we are called to “fear God, honor the king,” (1 Peter 2:17), to “render to Caesar

¹ Rasmussen Reports, “31% Think U.S. Civil War Likely Soon,” June 27, 2018. http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/june_2018/31_think_u_s_civil_war_likely_soon.

the things that are Caesar’s,” (Matthew 22:21), to do everything to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31), to “work heartily, as for the Lord” in all things (Colossians 3:23).

This report was supported by the Fetzer Institute to contribute to a healthy democracy in America. The Fetzer Institute is devoted to “helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.” It is not a Christian organization, but it shares with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) a concern for a healthy public square, which we both believe is informed by the unique resources of faith communities. The ERLC is devoted to, “engaging the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ and speaking to issues in the public square for the protection of religious liberty and human flourishing.” The Fetzer Institute sought to learn more about how American evangelical Christians might contribute to healing political and cultural divides in America. Secondly, and relatedly, this initiative also aims to identify gaps in Americans’ civic education and civic practice and to suggest ways to fill that gap. We hope to engage Christians on what healthy democratic participation looks like: how do we love our neighbors politically, and how might our faith lead us to advocate for human flourishing in the public square?²

The ERLC commissioned a public opinion poll (see Appendix B). A team of researchers conducted several dozen interviews with evangelical thought leaders (see Appendix C) and consulted academic and historical work on evangelicals and American politics (see Appendix D). This team talked and debated amongsts one another. And we prayed for wisdom.

This report shares what we heard from our interviews and learned from the public opinion poll. We do not have a central thesis or argument; we do not (yet) delve deeply into solutions or recommendations. This is only the first of many steps we aim to take over the following year. With the public release of this report, we hope to kick off a dialogue among churches, seminaries, with the public, in the media, and with the academy. We want to engage our friends, supporters, and critics across the range of issues covered here. We also hope to develop materials for use in churches based on this research, helping equip church leaders to teach their flock about how to love their neighbors politically. Civic education is not the church’s primary mission, but the church’s primary mission of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ has implications beyond the four walls of the church, and we hope to help churches teach about those implications with truth and love.

² Of note, the conclusions contained in this report represent the views of the researcher and do not necessarily express any official opinion or endorsement either by the Fetzer Institute, its trustees, or officers.



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THE STATE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE



Civility is not the most important virtue of public life: *justice* has a good claim to that. As several of our interviewees told us, there is a time and place for incivility when fighting injustice (war is uncivil yet, sometimes, just). But civility is a proxy variable, an indicator of the health or illness of the body politic. “The essence of civility is not spinelessness but self-control,” according to Bruce Ashford, professor, dean, and provost at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, “it is the capacity to show love and grace *particularly when* we disagree with others and even when we dislike them.”³ Civility is especially important because we live in a pluralistic democracy: we share government with people with whom we disagree. In normal times, we can and should expect civility from our fellow citizens. The absence of it is a warning, a symptom of some broader and deeper ailment. Civility is the proverbial canary in the coalmine: when it dies, we know there is poison in the air. The point is not the canary, but what its demise tells us. The goal of this report is not to perform CPR on a dead canary, but an autopsy. What killed American public discourse?

Our interviewees were unanimous that the canary is dead: they told us the American public square today is *caustic, compromised, confrontational, corrosive, demoralizing, discordant, dismal, dispiriting, divided, dysfunctional, emotionally exhausting, a frenzy of political rage, hostile, heated, inflammatory, incendiary, low, nasty, pathetic, polarized, phobic, self-aggrandizing, shocking, strained, superficial, terrible, toxic, unfortunate, unsympathetic, violent, vitriolic*, and (our favorites) marked by *circumambulatory imbecility* and *a dumpster fire*. There is “perpetual discord” and “perpetual rancor,” according to Samuel Rodriguez, President of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. Ray Ortlund, pastor of Immanuel Church, told us, “I remember 1968... It was just madness and I haven’t seen these levels of alienation, outrage, division, and so forth since then.” Sociologist and author Michael Emerson of North Park University said it was, “by far the most unhealthy I’ve ever seen and seemingly no end in sight. We exist in a state of fear.” We argue in bad faith: we argue only to score points, not to persuade one another—which makes sense, because no one listens to anyone else anyway. Public debate is a national exercise in confirmation bias. We listen only

³ Ashford, Bruce and Chris Pappalardo, *One Nation Under God*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 58.

to those with whom we already agree, and we listen to hear our preconceived notions about the other side affirmed. Tellingly, the single most common adjective our interviewees used was “toxic”: something that is actively poisonous and unhealthy even to be near. Such a situation is dangerous because we *should* engage in the public square. If the public square is toxic and unhealthy, fewer will participate than should while those who do will be sickened by it. In nearly 50 interviews with evangelical leaders, we did not hear a single positive estimation of the state of public discourse today (though some allowed that there were pockets of civility at locals levels, offline, and in face-to-face relationships). Several made direct analogies between today and the 1960s and 1850s.

Our poll respondents, similarly, gave us a frank picture of public discourse. Worryingly, over a fifth of respondents believed that civility in political conversations is not productive, rising to almost half of those aged 18 to 34. A quarter said that if a political leader they supported insulted an opponent, they would be inclined to believe such insults were justified. A third admitted to engaging in “whataboutism,” or responding to a critique by citing examples of wrongdoing on the other side. Only around 40 percent said that they had spoken up publicly to disapprove of someone on their side for unacceptable words or actions. Over half of evangelicals believed that if their political opponents were able to implement their agenda, democracy would be in danger. Evangelicals even appear to be comfortable with their news bubbles: over half said they trusted news more if delivered by someone with similar views on social and political issues.

Some of the problem may be that we imagine others to be worse than they are. Two-thirds of our respondents said that they tend to believe their political opponents’ motivations are good (this was especially true among southerners and Hispanics), but a majority did not believe the other side extended the same charity to them. In other words, when faced with a disagreement, we think the best of others but believe they think the worst of us, assuming they are less charitable to us than we to them. We are cultivating a martyrdom complex, always imagining ourselves to be taking the high ground compared to our opponents’ mendacity. We say we believe the best of others, but we use that belief to justify feeling superior to them.

Another worrying feature of today’s public square is evangelicals’ felt need to mask or disguise their beliefs in public. Over half of evangelicals report that they do not reveal their political beliefs in environments where those beliefs are unpopular. Over a third said they simply ignore disagreeable political comments in conversation rather than engaging them. David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, shared that his own research found that evangelicals are “least likely to say that they could have a natural, normal conversation with someone who is different than they are,”

compared to other religious groups. Interestingly, hiding one's political beliefs was associated with higher levels of incivility in LifeWay's civility index (see below), suggesting that evangelicals' habit of hiding their beliefs actively *harms* their public witness and the public square. A healthy public square is one in which citizens are not only legally allowed to express their views, but feel cultural permission to do so—or have courage to speak up when they do not. A healthy public witness means that Christians speak up against injustice, especially when speaking up is unpopular. Many evangelicals either feel they lack cultural permission or they lack the courage to speak up. Incidents such as Brendan Eich's resignation as CEO of Mozilla in 2014 after a public pressure campaign highlighted his views against gay marriage likely shape evangelicals' perception of the dangers of expressing their beliefs.

LIFEWAY'S CIVILITY INDEX

What is driving the polarization of the public square? Political scientists have long pointed to structural features in American politics, such as gerrymandering and the winner-take-all voting system, that promote polarization. But gerrymandering has been around for decades and the American electoral system for centuries. They do not explain the increase in polarization that our interviewees perceived. If it is true that

Evangelicals' habit of hiding their beliefs actively harms their public witness and the public square.

American political life has seen marked deterioration in recent decades, what has changed?

One way of answering that question is through our proprietary poll commissioned through LifeWay Research. LifeWay polled over 1,300 evangelicals nationwide to gauge our views on politics and religion (see Appendix A on methodology and definitions). We share those results throughout this report. (We acknowledge polls are declining in accuracy because of falling response rates and changing technology, but they still provide a useful, if rough, gauge of public opinion). In addition, analysts at LifeWay created a civility index drawn from several questions on the poll and ran multivariate regressions to determine what other observable factors might be associated with higher and lower civility scores. Their model found, for example, that women are more civil than men, and seniors more civil than youth. It is important to note that the civility index measures self-reported behavior, so it is possible respondents over- or under-reported their own behaviors. Still, the differ-

ences among what people voluntarily reported about themselves is notable.

Encouragingly, the LifeWay index found that higher levels of agreement with the statement, “Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin,” is associated with greater civility, suggesting that theological orthodoxy does help Christians’ public witness. Similarly, higher levels of civility were associated with a political worldview founded on the belief in the inherent and equal dignity of all; with friendships with people of a different income or a different religion; and with concern for religious liberty as a primary issue.

Lifeway’s model found several variables that were associated with lower civility. Some are not surprising, but they are sobering. Those who believe the stakes of our political disagreements are existential are less civil. Higher levels of agreement with “If those I disagree with politically are able to implement their agenda, our democracy will be in danger” are associated with lower civility scores (again, scores based on respondents’ own estimation of their behavior). Those who primarily get their news from social media or other online image- or video-based sources, especially YouTube, scored lower on the civility index. Text-based media is, by comparison, more informationally dense and thus closer to education and further from entertainment; it is “a very cool medium emotionally speaking,” in Andy Crouch’s words, Partner for Theology and Culture at Praxis, a medium almost designed not to engage us emotionally. Discouragingly, those who say that prominent Christian leaders have influenced their political views scored lower on the civility index.

That friendships with people different from ourselves helps make us more civil confirms the value of diversity. Praising diversity may be a politically correct cliché, but that does not mean it is wrong. The evidence confirms that as we encounter and learn about the world outside of our immediate experience, we tend to grow more empathetic. The dynamic works in reverse. Those who are comfortable with their self-imposed bubbles have lower civility scores on LifeWay’s index, including those who say they prefer to follow others on social media with whom they agree on social and political issues and those who prefer to get their news from someone with whom they already agree. When we root ourselves in a homogenous environment—cultural, informational, or socio-economic—we become dull to the needs of others. We need to encounter difference: different people, different backgrounds, and different ideas.⁴ When the Bible commands us to love our neighbors, it does not give us permission to choose the neighbors most like ourselves. The Good Samaritan was a lower-class, despised ethnic outsider.

⁴ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Other factors emerged as drivers of incivility in our research, including the poll and our interviews with evangelical leaders. Our interviewees were extraordinarily concerned about the influence of technology, especially social media and smartphones (the “glowing rectangle,” as Andy Crouch called it). They believed that social media often replaced actual human-to-human relationships. They cited studies that social media increased anxiety and loneliness, especially for teens.⁵ They echoed widespread concerns that social media gave its users a false sense of collective solidarity with a fictional “us,” and that it becomes a surrogate community. “We have become ogres through this social media infused world,” in the words of Rosaria Butterfield, author and former professor at Syracuse University. Author and speaker Kristie Anyabwile was concerned about “The freedom that people feel like is available to them to engage publicly” on social media. Because of that freedom, “social media makes everyone an ‘expert,’” ready to speak out on any issue with confidence that may not be well grounded. It also “makes us forget that there are people on the other end of our words.”

At its best, social media is a publishing platform for those overlooked by traditional media. It amplifies voices typically not heard on mainstream television or radio. In some cases, social media watchdogs have helped hold mainstream media accountable for factual accuracy or for the choices in what gets covered. Finally, social media also helps us find and form connections with others; it democratizes the power of networking and enables non-elites to form communities of interest.

But the problem with a social media community is that it is fundamentally shallow; it offers far less support, accountability, or restraint than real community. Ray Ortlund commented that he is “surprised and caught off guard at times with the immaturity that I see on social media from Christians.” Our social media community is entirely self-selected: we only follow or engage with the clicks, posts, friends, Tweets, and articles that we like or find interesting. In these “echo chambers,” as Marvin Olasky, editor of *World Magazine*, characterized them, “we all tend to pay attention to our own set of facts and not facts that are not accommodating to our viewpoint.” Andy Crouch suggested that the increasing availability of all forms of media “changes the scale of what counts as public,” shrinking our willingness to engage with our real-life communities and distorting our perception of what is actually going on around us. He reminded us that we are to love and serve the

⁵ Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

“flesh and blood” people around us, not the “cartoons” on our glowing rectangles. He also worried that the ubiquity of TV, tablets, and smartphones had led to a decline in our ability to focus and concentrate and led to a decline in our analytical capacity in favor of emotional stimulation. Catherine Parks, an author and prominent blogger, believed of social media that “there’s just a lot of room for it to promote fear of the other, fear of people that we don’t understand, or fear of our way of life being taken away, or fear of our rights being taken away...I think that this fear is motivating us to withdraw and retreat and kind of join with our tribe or our group and then we end up mischaracterizing the views of others.” Alan Jacobs, Professor of Humanities at Baylor University, be-

Especially when used for political engagement, social media gives users a deceptive sense of confidence and support from their virtual community

lieved that we, “have to be working against the grain of every social media platform to be patient and forbearing and generous and charitable.” We fabricate a social media community as an extension of ourselves and our interests. In that sense, social media community is both narcissistic and solipsistic.

Face-to-face community, by contrast, is there whether we like it or not; it pushes back on us. It is full of people who are different than we are, who have different likes and dislikes, and whose political opinions

we cannot ignore just by scrolling to the next post. Especially when used for political engagement, social media gives users a deceptive sense of confidence and support from their virtual community. That sense of virtual community, in turn, gives users felt permission to speak with far greater vigor, stridency, and confidence than they would speak to a live human being. Butterfield worried that in part because of the proliferation of social media, the distinction between public and private speech as been erased; we no longer have “private” conversations and thus lack the relation space to form deep connections with one another.

We suspect this dynamic may help explain why respondents in our poll who said their political views were influenced by prominent Christian leaders scored lower on the civility index. In the contemporary media environment, “prominent Christian leaders” are often those most successful at reaching a wide audience through television and social media. Their influence is thus impersonal, commodified, and packaged in a format that rewards emotional rather than

intellectual engagement. We hold out hope that Christian leaders might still exercise a helpful influence in local settings, print media, and face-to-face encounters.

Three-quarters of our survey respondents said they regularly got their news from television—half from Fox News alone—and almost 40 percent from news websites (again, with Fox News’ website the leader by a wide margin) and from social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, compared to just over a quarter from a print newspaper or magazine. Half of our respondents check Facebook several times per day and one-quarter visit YouTube with the same frequency. Despite that, the respondents were extraordinarily negative about the impact of TV, websites, and social media. Over half said television and news websites made public debate less respectful, and nearly two-thirds said the same about social media, compared to almost an equal number who felt the opposite about print news media. (Two-thirds claimed never to engage with others about social or political issues over social media, which is probably a net positive). Andy Crouch was especially concerned that image-based media, like TV, YouTube, and most social media, is “emotionally powerful,” and designed for “outrage amplification.” He exhorted us to “not have our own emotions and ways of thinking channeled by and captivated by media, especially the most emotionally resonant forms,” because “TV and video are very bad ways to learn about the world.” Why, then, do we spend so much time watching TV and browsing social media when we readily agree they are bad for us?

THE LOSS OF MORAL CONSENSUS

One reason we so readily immerse ourselves in our media bubbles is to find reassurance amidst a morally confusing world, which points to another major factor in the breakdown of the American public square: the loss of moral consensus in American society. The United States has experienced a profound religious and cultural shift in the past century or so. Earlier in American history, the United States could be seen as a kind of Christendom, broadly understood as a civilization shaped by the norms, symbols, and rhetoric of Christianity. That is not to claim all or most people were Christians, that official Christianity was necessarily correct or heartfelt, or that Christianity superseded secular cultural sources (like the Enlightenment). We simply recognize that Protestantism used to have an undisputed place as the privileged religion in the United States and that it provided much of the framework for moral and political discourse. (This raises the fraught question of whether the United States is or ever could be usefully described as a “Christian nation,” which we address in the closing pages of this report).

America’s Protestant cultural heritage has slowly evolved, first in the 19th century from the influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, the split of white Protestant churches into northern and south-

ern components, the formation of separate black Protestant churches, and the rise of theological liberalism. The fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early 20th century and a general cultural and political disillusionment after World War I further contributed to the erosion of Protestant cultural hegemony, setting the stage for dramatic cultural changes in mid-century.⁶ More broadly, the framework of American democracy itself, enshrining the disestablishment of religion and creating a free marketplace for religious competition, essentially guaranteed that religious pluralism would thrive in America. By the late 20th century, church membership declined and the number of Americans reporting no religious affiliation began to rise, especially in recent decades and among the youngest generations.⁷ As a result of these aggregate changes, Christianity lost its place as the privileged moral framework for public life.

Whether or not the American version of Christendom was good, bad, or a hypocritical façade is beside the point. Some celebrated the ways that a Christianized public culture helped create a presumption against some forms of injustice. Others argued that it just as often functioned to excuse or bless other kinds of injustice (especially slavery and racism)—and, besides, confused the gospel with political theory. For our purposes, we note that public Christianity played an important social function: It provided a point of moral consensus. It contributed to the public a common language with shared meanings (alongside secular sources, such as Enlightenment thought). Scholars and statesmen could debate *justice* because they had a common heritage defining what the word meant, or at least offering a shared history of a debate about its meaning. No longer: today, neither Christianity nor the Enlightenment provides a common frame of moral reference for public discussion.⁸ As Michael Wear, a former Obama administration official and Founder of Public Square Strategies, told us, “we don’t even share a common moral language anymore.” We not only disagree on which immigration policy is most just; we cannot agree on what “justice” means, or even if there is such a thing.⁹

⁶ Wilsey, John D, *One Nation Under God?: An Evangelical Critique of Christian America*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 138. See also Daniel Rogers, *Age of Fracture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” November 3, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

⁸ Marsden, George, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

⁹ See MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue*, (London: A&C Black, 2013), for a discussion of the change of moral meanings and our inability to have intelligible moral conversations.

The breakdown in moral consensus heightens the temperature of public debate. Jonathan Leeman, editorial director of 9Marks, told us, “There are increasingly divergent conceptions of justice, animating our public square engagement—and those competing understandings of justice and morality broadly lead to raise the volume and make the stakes feel higher for everyone such that civility in those conversations is more and more under threat.” Because we lack shared meanings, reasoned discourse seems impossible, and thus public discussion deteriorates into a shouting match, a performative exercise, or a joust rather than an exchange of ideas. Our interviewees hinted at this when many of them noted that public debate was characterized by people *talking past one another or talking at one another*. To *talk past* someone is different from *talking to* or *talking with* them. “We are not good listeners,” as Danny Akin, president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, “we are really good at...talking at people, but we are not very good at listening to people.” Cherie Harder, President of the Trinity Forum, said public discourse is a contest between “verbal gladiators.” We *talk past* when we talk *in the presence of* someone else but without aiming at their understanding or persuasion, and without any intention of reciprocal listening. It is talking as performance, treating the other person as an audience or a target rather than a respondent. We exchange monologues, but we do not dialogue. As Alan Noble, Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University, told us, “Often times when we are actually communicating in the public square, we are not sincerely having conversations and trying to persuade people, we are posturing in order to signal to other people what our identity is. We will share a political meme not because we actually care about refugees but because we want to be known as the type of person who cares about refugees.”

As Jonathan Haidt has helped explain, there are some real psychological reasons for this kind of tribalism. We tend, for example, to reach our moral judgments more through feeling than through careful scrutiny or reasoned analysis.¹⁰ Our moral framework is largely an inherited set of attitudes, not a set of examined propositions, and so we are often unprepared to discuss moral differences rationally. Some secular philosophers have even argued that this shouting match is simply how it always has been and always will be. In our “postmodern condition,” truth-claims are masks for power and public discussion is a raw contest for power. Whoever can construct the most powerful and persuasive narrative will own the “truth” and win the power and prestige that go with it. This way of viewing truth and politics is widespread in higher education. Part of the reason citizens talk past one another and act as if reasoned discourse were impossible is because we have been taught

¹⁰ Haidt, Jonathan, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, (New York: Vintage, 2012.)

to do so and some of us have college degrees in how to do it best. The problem is not new—Plato built a career railing against the original Sophists—but has been normalized by the conditions of the contemporary American university and public square.

This dynamic is exacerbated by the same media and technology trends we noted above. The media industry fragmented with the rise of the internet and social media. The shared understanding of public things provided by traditional media, dominated by three big television networks, vanished. In its place, we are free to select news and entertainment that caters to our tribe or subculture, whether fundamentalist, progressive, secular, high-brow, Midwestern, mainline, or something else. Each tribe inhabits its own informational environment, bolstered because these subtribes are the only “public” that still have shared meanings and a shared moral consensus. We talk to each other within these bubbles, but we talk at, and about, people in other bubbles. In a sense, we now inhabit a world similar to what Samuel Huntington called the “clash of civilizations,” except the clash runs between the tribes, political parties, and neighborhoods around us as much as between nations and religions. Michael Emerson suggested to us that the diversity of worldviews and ideologies in the public square has made it harder for us to understand and trust one another. Bruce Ashford worried that Christians have “been disciplined by political talk radio and television shows so thoroughly and so deeply that the church doesn’t have a shot.”

The loss of moral consensus is also reflected in, and reinforced by, the different versions of history we tell ourselves. Our information bubbles surround not only the media’s coverage of current events but what we believe about our common history. Jason Cook, Associate Pastor of Fellowship Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee, worried about the “white washing” of history, warning of the “massive disservice done to mostly white America—but really all Americans—by not including important aspects of America’s history.” Even more, when both sides select their preferred version of history, “now those two [sides] disagree on the true state of reality.” Matthew Lee Anderson, a Research Fellow at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, shared a similar concern: “Part of the problem with public discourse is that we don’t have a common history about how we arrived here. We start our histories at different points and as a result we tend to select different heroes and villains from within those histories.” When we cannot even agree on basic facts or what’s real in history, we are even more apt to retreat into our respective tribal enclaves and distrust one another. Mark Dever, Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, hoped Christians would “Learn American history better; learn the experiences of people who disagree with them better.” Jemar Tisby—president and co-founder of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective—exhorted Christians to study history because it helps “develops empathy for people, particularly for folks who

are experiencing an injustice.” The problem is that each tribe wants to believe in and propagate a simple moral narrative in which they are the good guys, rather than recognizing that human history, even at its best, is filled with paradoxes, and contradictions, and ironies—which is what we should expect given our belief in human depravity.¹¹

THE ATROPHY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

With the loss of shared meaning, citizens are far less apt to gather together in voluntary associations for a common purpose, or even a common hobby. Sociologists have raised alarms for decades about how Americans are increasingly “bowling alone.”¹² In our survey, it was notable how few evangelicals are engaged in any type of non-religious civic activity. Less than fifteen percent said they participated monthly in any type of organization (not counting church), including sports clubs, hobby clubs, affinity groups, neighborhood associations, non-profit organizations, veterans’ groups, and more. Over 70 percent said they participated in none at all. This tracks closely with the long-observed decline in social activity and civil society across the United States and, indeed, across much of the developed world.

The decline in civic associations is both cause and consequence of the deterioration of the public square. Civic associations mediate non-political friendships among citizens with diverse backgrounds. Outside of public schools and the armed forces, they are probably where citizens are most likely to befriend others of a different income level, religion, or racial or ethnic background. Such friendships, as we saw, are associated with higher levels of civility. That is why Alexis de Tocqueville believed civic associations to be necessary for the preservation of democracy: “An association, be it political, industrial, commercial, or even literary or scientific, is an educated and powerful body of citizens which cannot

With the loss of shared meaning, citizens are far less apt to gather together in voluntary associations for a common purpose, or even a common hobby.

¹¹ For further discussion on the importance of history, see Fea, John, *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

¹² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).

be twisted to any man's will or quietly trodden down, and by defending its private interests against the encroachments of power, it saves the common liberties." He went on:

Freedom of association has become a necessary guarantee against the tyranny of the majority...No countries need associations more—to prevent either despotism or parties or the arbitrary rule of a prince—than those with a democratic social state...In countries where such associations do not exist, if private people did not artificially and temporarily create something like them, I see no other dike to hold back tyranny of whatever sort, and a great nation might with impunity be oppressed by some tiny faction or by a single man.¹³

More to the point, we cannot love our neighbors if we do not know them. Rosaria Butterfield believed that, "We have neglected to show hospitality in the most classic biblical sense of that word to our unbelieving neighbors. Instead of seeing conflict as an opportunity to commandeer with gospel grace the evil that we know is in the world, we have simply responded in kind." Civic associations are the place where we meet our neighbor, cooperate with them on issues of public concern, recreate together, and otherwise get outside of ourselves to be involved in the lives of others. Tocqueville, again, said "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another."¹⁴ Our retreat from civil society into our self-selected informational bubbles and tribes means we are not taking even the first step necessary to know and love others made in the image of God.

POLITICAL TRIBES AS THE NEW FORM OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Human beings are social and political animals. We are made for community. When we lose one kind of community, we invent others to take its place. We have lost forms of community with the decline in civil society, the decline in church membership, and the loss of moral consensus. We have invented new forms of community through social media and self-selected information bubbles, often reinforced by different historical narratives. But that is not the only substitute we have invented for ourselves. Perhaps the greatest single manifestation of the problem we are

¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 192.

¹⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 516.

studying is our increasing tendency to look to political tribes as a new form of community—even of religious community.

Political scientists have noticed the growing polarization in the electorate for decades as the two major political parties have drifted further away from the median voter towards ideologically rigid positions at the far ends of the political spectrum. The same phenomenon is apparent among elected officials: party membership was not formerly a strong indicator of where one fell on the liberal-conservative spectrum, but now the most conservative member of the Democratic caucus in the U.S. congress is more liberal than the most liberal member of the Republican caucus.¹⁵

Polarization in voting behavior and among elected officials is only one part of the tribalization of American politics. More worrying is our tendency to sift ourselves into geographically-distinct, politically- and culturally-homogenous neighborhoods and even states in what amounts to “the Big Sort,” as journalist Bill Bishop dubbed it.¹⁶ It is good civic hygiene to know and befriend people of a different race, religion, and income level, but Americans are increasingly choosing to live in neighborhoods and go to schools and churches where we never have to meet them. Such homogenization has political consequences. Our social location shapes our political engagement; homogenous social environments likely harden and reinforce our political stances. We can speak of “red” states and “blue” states because much of the country is virtually run by single-party government. After the 2018 election, 37 state governments were dominated by a one-party trifecta (in which the governor and the majority of both houses of its legislature come from the same party), up from 20 states in 2006.¹⁷

Our political tribes are bad for democracy. Because we isolate ourselves from information or news from the other side, we harden and accelerate political division and fuel polarization. We encourage ourselves to think the worst of our opponents and actively cultivate distrust in our fellow citizens. We blind ourselves to our own faults, listening to echo chambers that confirm our existing biases. This is not a problem of “partisanship,” because the actual political parties are institutionally weaker than

¹⁵ Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal, “The polarization of American politics.” *The Journal of Politics* 46, no. 4 (1984): 1061-1079. Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams, “Political polarization in the American public,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 563-588. Layman, Geoffrey C., Thomas M. Carsey, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, “Party polarization in American politics: Characteristics, causes, and consequences.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 83-110.

¹⁶ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, (Wilmington, NC: Mariner Books, 2008).

¹⁷ BallotPedia.com, “State Government Trifectas,” https://ballotpedia.org/State_government_trifectas#Changes_in_trifectas_status and “Who Runs the States,” https://ballotpedia.org/Ballotpedia:Who_Runs_the_States_Partisanship_Results_State_Government_Trifectas

they have ever been and are not the main drivers of political tribalization; stronger parties would likely help *moderate* public discourse, not worsen it. At the individual level, political tribalization is rooted in ideological inflexibility matched with righteous certainty in our own wisdom, intolerance for the necessity of compromise, and impatience with the machinery of democracy.

When we allow our faith to reinforce rather than challenge this dynamic, religion can worsen the state of public discourse. Peter J. Wehner, a senior fellow with the Ethics and Public Policy

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Center and former Bush administration official, believed religion was “accelerating the worst tendencies, not the best tendencies, in American political life” because some used religion as a tool for “appealing to people’s worst instincts,” treating it as “just another weapon in a larger partisan and political war.” Jemar Tisby believed that “religion hardens our positions because...we baptize our beliefs with the Bible whether those be-

liefs actually cohere with the grand narrative of the Bible or not,” (though by the same token “it motivates people to fight for justice against extremely difficult odds”).

Michael Emerson pointed to how “our segregation [and] the completeness and totality of the structures we have created through our churches, our denominations, and our networks make it difficult,” to understand or trust those outside our bubbles. Michael Wear described religion as a “rhetorical tool box” that people used to “rationalize” their political beliefs. Ray Ortlund said, “I have come to believe that our moral fervor is the most immoral thing about us and we are truly blind to it.” We are certain that we are right, “they” are not only wrong but dangerous, and thus compromise is a form of treason and possibly heresy.¹⁸ Political tribes turn us from democratic citizens into mindless culture warriors. Simply put, we are making ourselves stupider and meaner.

The situation is remarkably similar to what James Madison warned about in *The Federalist Papers* 10. Our political tribes are what Madison called a “faction,” which he defined as “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” He warned that we would

¹⁸ See, for example, Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—And How to Heal*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

be tempted to eliminate faction “by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.” In other words, one way out of our never-ending culture war would be victory for one side or the other. Tribalism goes away if there is only one tribe. As some of our interviewees warned, that is essentially the goal of both the progressive left and nationalist right in the United States, both of whom seek to use the government as a tool to impose their preferred cultural blueprint on American society. According to Madison, it would also be the end of the American experiment in free government. In this sense, the worst possible outcome of the culture war would be for either side to win it.

There is a tragic irony here. We noted earlier higher levels of agreement with the statement “If those I disagree with politically are able to implement their agenda, our democracy will be in danger” are associated with lower civility scores. But their relatively lower civility does not mean they are wrong. In one sense, *both* sides are correct that the other side’s victory would endanger democracy, though not for the reasons they think. The left and right fear each other’s policies, but the greater danger lies in how either sides would use government in the service of an “unconstrained” vision of political life. The victory of one tribe or the other would mean the victory of *tribalism* as a means to power, which may be worse than whatever policy either tribe would advocate.¹⁹ Madison argued that we need checks and balances among differing opinions and factions to guard against the tyranny of the majority or mob rule.

As bad as that is, that is not the worst danger of political tribalism. In addition to the danger they pose to our system of government, our political tribes are bad for our churches, our souls, and our public witness as Christians. Several of our interviewees believed that we are treating our political tribes as idol or substitute churches, looking to them to be our primary locus of meaning, community, and fulfillment. Jemar Tisby said, “we have made a god out of a political party or a political agenda and we look to that party or that agenda for salvation.” Karen Ellis—an author, speaker, and doctoral candidate at Oxford University—similarly argued that, “people are turning their primary temporal identity into a religion in and of itself.”

Michael Wear worried about our increasing tendency to look to the public square for “emotional validation” and “cultural affirmation.” Alan Jacobs believed “discourse is used more for the reaffirmation of tribal identities and the exclusion of the outgroup than it is for telling the truth.” Catherine Parks was worried about “how much people have looked to politics or political figures

¹⁹ On constrained vs. unconstrained visions of political life, see Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions*, Revised edition, (New York: Basic books, 2007).

for as kind of a savior figure.” Jonathan Leeman criticized “our implicit utopianism,” in which “we set about to create heaven on earth now as if our salvation and the blessing of the nations depended on it.” Samuel Rodriguez argued that “We drink the Republican and Democratic Kool-Aid,” and that we listen to our pundits as if “they were messengers from heaven.” He called our political tribes “quasi-cultic,” and compared our devotion to our favorite pundits to Jim Jones’ followers. Trevin Wax, Director for Bibles and Reference at LifeWay Christian Resources, worried that we have lost the ability to engage in “self-critique” because of the “religious fervor” with which we hold our political opinions. Michael Emerson told us that “For many people of color and even for young white folks there’s been a suspicion that evangelical religion isn’t religion; it’s a political movement.” “We place too much hope in politics,” Cherie Harder believed.

In our current moment, we cannot escape the conclusion that political tribalism is idolatry. If our political convictions line up entirely with the platform of one or the other party, when both so clearly advocate different forms of injustice, we betray our public witness and undermine the gospel. We also compromise the integrity and independence of the church by making our loyalty to a political agenda more important. When we give in to tribalism, we look to political activism to achieve true justice, confusing what Augustine called the City of Man with the City of God, as in the example of those who would equate American as a new Israel. But the public square cannot provide ultimate meaning, government cannot achieve perfect justice, and our political tribes cannot provide true community. We expect unreasonable things from government and invest political things with too much hope and meaning. We are lying to ourselves, setting ourselves up for disappointment, and through our actions preaching a false gospel to the world. As Richard John Neuhaus famously wrote in 1990, “the first thing to be said about public life is that public life is not the first thing.”



2

A CHRISTIAN POLITICAL AGENDA?



In this report, we want to discern how evangelicals can help improve the public square. Before we can do that, we need to take the temperature of American evangelicals, to put our finger on the pulse of our community, especially regarding our political beliefs and behavior. We need to establish a baseline of what our co-religionists feel and believe about politics and religion and what sort of behavior these beliefs foster. We want to see where evangelicals fit with the picture painted in the first section of this report. How much are we evangelicals part of the problem, and how well positioned are we to be a part of the solution? How do evangelicals think about politics, and what trends can we discern in our political behavior?

Our poll corroborated a wide body of other reporting about the political behavior of evangelicals. Half of our respondents self-identified as Republicans. Interestingly, almost a third of those espousing evangelical *beliefs* identified as Democrats, but only a quarter of those who self-identified with the evangelical *label* did so. In other words, Democrats appear hesitant to call themselves “evangelical” even when they profess evangelical beliefs, corroborating that the label carries political and cultural connotations unpopular with the left. Consistent with national trends, older and whiter evangelicals, especially in the South and West, were more likely to identify as Republicans; Northeastern and African American evangelicals were (far) more likely to identify as Democrats. The God-gap is real: weekly church attendance is correlated with Republican identification.²⁰

Evangelicals are poorer than the national average. According to a separate study by the Pew Research Center, 57 percent of evangelical households have an annual income less than \$50,000, compared to 42 percent of all Americans. Only 14 percent of evangelicals have a household income over \$100,000, compared to 29 percent of all Americans.²¹

Evangelicals apparently have a strong sense of civic duty. Three-quarters of respondents claim to have voted in the 2016 primary, 2016 general election, and 2018 mid-term election, well above the

²⁰ See Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²¹ Pew Research Center, “Evangelical Protestants,” <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>. Compare to the national average at “United States Household Income Brackets and Percentiles in 2018,” <https://dqyvj.com/united-states-household-income-brackets-percentiles/>

national voter participation rate (which is around 60 percent in presidential election years and 40 percent in mid-term years). Older and more educated evangelicals voted in even higher numbers. However, for around 40 percent of respondents, voting is their only political activity. Very few (less than 15 percent) report having donated money to a campaign, attended an event with a candidate, or campaigned for a candidate, probably the highest-cost forms of political engagement. A third report doing research and almost 40 percent watch televised debates, by comparison the easiest forms of engagement.

Evangelicals are comfortable with the idea that their faith informs their politics. Between 75 and 85 percent said the Bible informed their political views; that they look for biblical principles to apply in political issues; and that their faith influences how they engage others politically. Over half said that the teachings of their local church or a prominent Christian leader influenced their political views. But these are, again, self-reported figures. Some of our interviewees suggested they saw little evidence that we evangelicals are truly or rightly influenced by our faith in the public square.

In particular, our interviewees consistently warned that we are mixing our faith with our politics in the wrong way. Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, wondered if evangelicals have become more apt to let politics and partisanship drive their theology rather than the other way around. Mark Noll, Research Professor at Regent College, concurred: He believed other social and political factors were “manipulating” religious belief and religiously-motivated activism, rather than religious belief driving public discourse. Alan Noble similarly worried that our faith “is being used to buttress our biases and not as the corrective that forms us and therefore shapes our politics.” Peter J. Wehner warned against the temptation to “baptize” or “sacralize” our political beliefs with “the imprimatur of faith.” Adron Robinson, Senior Pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church, argued that public discourse would not be so caustic if evangelicals consistently viewed others as made in the image of God, that we would spend more time listening to others and would not “demonize” them. He also criticized what he believed was our tendency to “compartmentalize” our faith from our politics.

Our respondents claimed not to be single-issue voters by a wide margin (about 80 percent said they cared about several issues compared to less than 10 percent who identified as single-issue voters). Despite that, over half agreed that they would only support a candidate who was pro-life, roughly the same number who said the same about candidates who would fight racial injustice. Between 85 and 90 percent said they would only support candidates who demonstrate personal integrity, though the 2016 election suggests there are circumstances that override evangelicals’

concerns for personal integrity. Between 66 and 70 percent said that they would only vote for a candidate they believe is a Christian.

Our respondents surprised us by how little they appeared to care about stereotypically evangelical causes. The top public policy issues they were concerned about were healthcare, the economy, and national security, followed by immigration. Only a third listed religious liberty as a top concern and less than 30 percent said the same about abortion. Between a fifth and a quarter said providing for the needy or working for racial justice was a top concern.

But the biggest story about evangelicals and their political concerns is the obvious and troubling racial and ethnic fault line. White evangelicals have a different set of political priorities than non-white evangelicals. White evangelicals are far more likely to list abortion, religious liberty, national security, or immigration as a top concern than African American evangelicals or black Protestants. African Americans are more likely to list helping the needy, healthcare, and racial injustice. Evangelicals who attend church most frequently are least likely to say that helping the needy is a top concern. At 11 percent, white evangelicals are the least likely to say racial injustice is a top concern.

The biggest story about evangelicals and their political concerns is the obvious and troubling racial and ethnic fault line.

THINKING ABOUT POLITICS

In this section, we begin to sketch out the outlines of an approach to politics that we hope can appeal across these divides. What should a Christian public witness look like? How can evangelicals work to improve our public witness, love our neighbors political-

ly, and seek the prosperity of our city? Such an approach, we pray, will contribute to the peace and prosperity of our city, be an example of civil public discourse, and enliven Christians' public witness.²²

A full discussion is beyond the scope of this report, but some themes emerged from our interviews and poll clustered around human dignity, abortion, religious liberty, race and ethnicity, and the culture of democracy. We sketch these themes below in hopes of structuring a conversation among our readers in the months and years ahead.

²² See "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," by the National Association of Evangelicals, 2018, for a similar effort to answer these questions.

First, it is extremely difficult to forge a consensus among evangelicals on specific political issues. It is not terribly difficult to find consensus among white Christians, or among black Christians—but it is extraordinarily difficult to find consensus across racial and ethnic lines. As noted above, white evangelicals are more likely to list abortion, religious freedom, and immigration among their top concerns; non-whites are more likely to list caring for the poor and racial injustice. We noted the same division among our interviewees. When asked what the top priorities for Christian political action should be, African American and non-white interviewees were more likely to list prison reform, immigration, and social justice; white interviewees were more likely to list human dignity, abortion (sometimes subsumed under the broader category of bioethics), marriage, and religious liberty. Some interviewees chose not to answer. Samuel Rodriguez simplified the division among evangelicals as between whites who prioritize abortion against blacks who prioritize racial justice. Bishop A.B. Vines believed that “not a lot of white Christians care about the poor.”

At least one interviewee was skeptical that consensus among Christians across racial and ethnic lines was possible. Mark Noll noted:

I do not think that Christian believers, particularly in a large culturally pluralistic society, should ever expect to have Christian unity on public policy. Christian values need to be expressed and worked out in life situations. Life situations are always colored by historical forces, cultural assumptions, social realities. And because historical forces, cultural values, and social realities are going to be different for different communities, Christian teaching by its plentitude is going to nurture in different ways communities that have these historical, cultural, and social differences.

We might even interpret the split among evangelicals in positive terms. Christians are not politically unified, which means there is a strong Christian witness on both ends of the political spectrum who collectively advocate for justice across the full range of political issues. We can rejoice that Christians are involved in both parties on a myriad of issues. We would not want to see a single “Christian party,” that gathered Christians *out* of every other party or institution. To do so would remove our salt and light and keep it exclusively in one place. Salt is meant to be worked into the dough, not piled in the pantry or served by itself. With our witness sprinkled across the political spectrum, we can hold all sides to account for their particular weaknesses. In this interpretation, we might exhort conservative white Christians to be a stronger voice against racial injustice and poverty in the Republican Party and left-leaning non-white Christians to be

a stronger voice against abortion and for religious liberty in the Democratic Party. Regardless of whether consensus is desirable or possible, we note the fact that whites are comparatively less concerned about racial injustice or poverty, and blacks about religious freedom, is evidence that we need to do better articulating the underlying principles that should animate concern for all of the above.

Second: the question is not whether churches should talk about politics *more* or *less*. Some churches abstain from political talk altogether to avoid controversy or (they claim) to focus only on what is central to the gospel. Avoiding politics altogether ironically fails to truly focus on the gospel: rather, it focuses only on the parts of the gospel the preacher or congregation are most comfortable with. Historically, evangelicalism has thrived in the open religious marketplace created by disestablishment, but that also means it is consumer-driven. It is bad business for salesmen (preachers) to rebuke and possibly offend their “customers,” by talking about controversial political issues or confronting a congregation’s social, cultural, or political sins.

Avoiding politics altogether is usually possible only among communities with enough privilege to ignore political issues. Jemar Tisby told us that, “if you look at any other Christian theological tradition that’s coming from a marginalized community, you’re going to find a lot more explicit talk about politics in the church,” than in many white evangelical churches. Thabiti Anyabwile similarly shared, “So many white evangelicals say ‘It’s not the church’s mission to do X, Y, or Z, [because] our mission is to preach the gospel,’” which he viewed as an unrealistic stance for churches whose members face serious social, cultural, or political challenges, such as endemic unemployment, poverty, or discrimination. He called for preachers to be “prophetic” but warned that some “preachers, in their fear of man and fear of their congregations, will seek to be palatable rather than prophetic.”

But the answer is not to simply talk about politics *more*, because there are unwise ways of addressing politics from the pulpit. Focusing exclusively on political activism turns the church into a lobbying organization and really does risk losing the gospel (as the history of the Social Gospel movement shows). Marvin Olasky believed that “theological conservatives in some situations overuse the Bible,” for subjects on which the Bible is silent. Mark Dever reminded us that most political disputes are over routine matters that do not necessarily have a clear moral or biblical dimension, and that “if I try to tyrannize the people in my church by saying hey we all need to take [the same] line in order to take communion, I have hugely diminished Christianity and I have reduced it to a political servant.” Nor is the answer to selectively address a few political issues, which usually ends up confirming, rather than challenging, the congregations’ preexisting convictions.

Michael Horton lamented that “the evangelical movement itself seems to me pretty shallow in its engagement with society partly because its theology is kind of shallow...it doesn’t seem that we have a very profound social doctrine that pushes back against the right as much as it pushes back against the left.” Alan Jacobs wants churches to talk about politics, “not in the sense of

There is a disconnect between what scholars and theologians are writing about politics and what is practiced in the pews.

policies or who to vote for, but politics in the much broader sense: what does it mean to be a political animal? What does it mean to be someone who is in the midst of a vast and complex society full of people who disagree with you in all sorts of ways? And what does it mean to be faithful and Christian in that world?” We seek to address that broader sense of political engagement in the subsection below on the culture of democracy.

Third, the problem is *not* that we lack a proper political theology, or that we need more academic theological work done. Theologians and Christian scholars have done an extraordinary job of exploring the

intersection of Christianity and politics (see Appendix D). But the lived political theology in the pews does not reflect the academic theology taught in our seminaries and published by our presses. There is a disconnect between what scholars and theologians are writing about politics and what is practiced in the pews. Evangelicals are taking their political cue from elsewhere. Michael Emerson commented that, despite our knowledge of Scripture, we seem to be either unwilling or unable to practice its principles because the “translation [of Scripture] through [our] cultural lens...makes it so it can’t actually happen.” Kristie Anyabwile believed “We aren’t making clear distinctions between what we believe on a political basis and what is biblical. We say ‘this is what the Bible teaches,’ but we’re allowing tradition or ways we’ve been raised or what our political viewpoint is to skew what Scripture teaches.” Our cultural blinders are effectively more powerful than biblical principles.

The question is: how can churches engage in *formation* or *discipleship* (“political discipleship” as Alan Noble called it), especially when competing with secular sources of formation, including public schools, talk radio, traditional media, and social media.²³ Bruce Ashford wrote that “Christian

²³ For an effort in this direction, see Bacon, Vincent E, *The Political Disciple: A Theology of Public Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

churches should be formation centers for righteousness—not merely private righteousness...but public righteousness.”²⁴ Collin Hansen worried that the church is “not much of a match for the political catechism that marks our everyday lives, specifically through the Internet, talk radio, social media, and cable news.” Trevin Wax hoped the church would create a “moral ecology” in which “moral formation” could take place because “if that’s not the case then something else is going to fill the gap and provide that moral formation.” The very concept of formation is worryingly foreign to contemporary evangelical practice. Formation is the process of shepherding a person along the path of discipleship to Jesus, forming the habits and character of a faithful disciple, encouraging and exhorting Christians to work for greater maturity and sanctification. Alan Jacobs had a sobering insight:

Very few churches overall are really interested in Christian formation. They know that if they demand a level of Christian formation of people, if they demand spiritual disciplines from them, if they demand serious study from them... they’re afraid that if they do that then the people will not be entertained and will go somewhere where they are entertained and where they are affirmed and where they’re not asked to think hard thoughts and practice difficult disciplines.

The evangelical tradition, founded on *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, has sometimes devolved into antinomianism and cheap grace, which undermine the foundations of discipleship and formation. (The Roman Catholic Church, which has a much more structured process of formation, has of course sometimes shown the opposite tendency). The question of recovering a practice of formation in the evangelical tradition is beyond the scope of this report, but we touch upon it where relevant.

HUMAN DIGNITY

Our interviewees regularly returned to the idea that *human dignity* and *human flourishing* should be the central organizing concept for Christian politics. Alan Jacobs referenced the “seamless garment” or “consistent ethic of life,” as articulated by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin; others talked similarly about the paramount importance of protecting life *at all stages*. On this, the thought leaders and the population as a whole seem to agree. About 90 percent of the survey respondents agreed that their political views are informed by the idea that every human being has equal and inherent

²⁴ Ashford and Pappalardo, *One Nation*, 57-8.

dignity. God made humanity uniquely in his image. He desires our life and our flourishing; and so should we. The biblical idea of love (*agape*) means working for the good and flourishing of another.

Interestingly, few interviewees cast this idea in terms of *justice*, though they would have had ample biblical grounds for doing so. As Tim Keller has argued, justice in the Bible is largely a matter of pursuing flourishing and *shalom* for all, with special emphasis on those who cannot advocate for themselves—an emphasis several interviewees reiterated.²⁵ Following the biblical example, Augustine linked justice with peace and flourishing in what he called the *tranquility of order*, or the “peace of the just.” Similarly, Aquinas argued that liberality and giving succor to the needy was a necessary part of justice because justice is giving to each his due: we must give the needy the respect and dignity due to them as human beings. Justice, peace, and flourishing are linked concepts, or different faces of a multifaceted gem. Nevertheless, today the word *justice* seems to have fallen into disuse in the public square except when paired with a modifier, as in *social justice* or *economic justice*.

Centering our political thought on justice understood as *human flourishing* helps us guard against the political idolatries of the left and right, for whom *equality* and *liberty* are the central organizing principles, respectively. Both are virtues (we have *equal* human dignity, and we need some degree of *liberty* to flourish), but both distort the human person and human society if taken as the sole or highest political principle. Focusing public policy on enforcing equality typically abridges freedom (e.g., by restricting economic freedom to reduce income inequality), and vice versa. If evangelicals asked not, “What increases my equality?” or “What increases my liberty?” but rather, “What increases my neighbor’s flourishing?” we would contribute a unique voice to the public square. Michael Emerson suggested that Christians ask themselves, “Who are the marginalized among us? And how can I use my vote to best help the marginalized—not to best help myself, which I think is the default.”

Afshin Ziafat, Lead Pastor of Providence Church, challenged us not to think of politics first as Americans, concerned with our own safety and comfort, but as Christians. “When you’re a Christian you are a Christian before you’re an American,” he said. As Christians, we must recognize that “God has commanded me to care for those again who are, for instance, sojourners and foreigners and inmates, [and] especially the orphan and widow.” Ziafat believed that should change how we approach everything from immigration, refugees, prison reform, and more.

Focusing on human dignity would also improve *how* we make our arguments. Peter J. Wehner believed, “You can be extremely strong and passionate in your convictions and your criticisms, and speak the truth in a prophetic way, and still not be uncivil. You don’t have to engage in *ad hominem*

²⁵ Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, (New York: Viking, 2010).

attacks, you don't have to try and diminish people as human beings." No matter what our position on immigration policy, we should speak of immigrants (legal and illegal) as human beings who deserve respectful treatment. Advocating for tougher border control, for example, does not require advocates to appeal to racist sentiment against non-whites. Enforcing the border, as the law rightfully requires, does not require draconian methods, such as separating families or housing illegal immigrants in unsanitary and unsafe facilities. To take another example: even in cases of war, we are called to wage war out of love for our neighbors and our enemies. Waging war against another nation should never be accompanied by hatred, vindictiveness, or needless brutality.

ABORTION

The issue of abortion looms large in evangelical circles, as was strongly reflected in our interviews.²⁶ Danny Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, called it "the American holocaust" and Bruce Ashford said *Roe v. Wade* "was like an environmental disaster in the moral ecology of our country." Evangelicals have been staunchly prolife since *Roe vs. Wade*, learning from Roman Catholics the importance of a consistent ethic of life. Christians can be justly proud that for forty years we have been at the forefront of one of the most important public policy issues of our times. Evangelicals have gone beyond protesting outside abortion clinics: they have opened and manned countless crisis pregnancy centers, advocated for adoption and foster care, investigated the abortion industry, mounted legal challenges to abortion procedures, and gradually expanded the agenda of the pro-life movement. The urgency of this issue was highlighted recently by legislative moves in New York and Virginia to expand the legal availability of abortion beyond what it already is.

It is also important to note that, at its best, anti-abortion activism should not be understood as a "single issue." Abortion is a proxy for an entire worldview. Support for abortion is support for the values and norms of the Sexual Revolution, for progressive views on gender, and for a certain view of human personhood and liberty. Supreme Court Associate Justice Anthony Kennedy made this explicit when he wrote in a 1992 case affirming the constitutional right to abortion that, "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe,

²⁶ Several works have explored the connection between evangelicals, the anti-abortion movement, and the Republican Party see: Young, Neil J, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Williams, Daniel K, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Williams, Daniel K, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

and of the mystery of human life.”²⁷ Securing that conception of liberty requires the government to enable citizens to overcome any and all “obstacles” to the expression of their identity and their concept of existence, up to and including an unwanted pregnancy, one’s biological gender, or the traditional understanding of marriage.

Those who prioritize anti-abortion activism as their primary political concern do so in the belief that it is the frontline of a broader battle against a worldview antithetical in its essence to the Christian understanding of the world and of human life. Anti-abortion activism opposes abortion but also the entire worldview from which it springs. The prolife ideology starts with abortion, because evangelicals can never be less than prolife, but these same principles that animate opposition to abortion also lead us to a broader concern for life at all stage, in all conditions, in all times.

Eric Teetsel argued that abortion is the most important public policy of our time, and that a proper theological triage should lead Christians to prioritize prolife advocacy over other issues.²⁸ “It’s easy to bash the prolife movement. There are certainly areas for improvement,” but he warned strongly against a spirit of division that could undermine the effort. Teetsel defended the primacy of abortion in evangelicals’ public concerns. “To the extent that the evangelical movement is understood to be essentially a profile movement, I think that is reflective of a biblical standard—especially in more recent years as our work on abortion has come to include things like a primary concern for the wellbeing of the pregnant woman in addition to the unborn child.” Author and speaker Donna Gaines similarly told us, “The pro-life issue is to me an issue that cannot be ignored and it is the number one issue for me.”

But other interviewees told us that the prolife movement has sometimes failed to apply the movement’s underlying reasoning to the full spectrum of public policy issues. There is a sense among evangelical leaders, especially non-white leaders, that the prolife worldview has in fact oftentimes become a single-issue campaign. Michael Emerson warned about approaching politics in such a way that “you don’t care about the greater community, you don’t you don’t care what collateral damage happens. You just get one goal and you’ll do whatever it takes to get the great win.” Mark Dever believed both prolife vantage points were morally defensible: “I do think it can be okay to be a single-issue voter on abortion, I do think it is also morally defensible for the person who thinks abortion is murder to not be a single-issue voter on the question of abortion.”

²⁷ *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

²⁸ On theological triage, see Al Mohler, “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” May 20, 2004. <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/>

The LifeWay civility index shows quite clearly that single-issue voting is associated with a decrease in civility. A question that remains with any single-issue approach to politics (regardless of what issue is at stake) is the question of incentive. Do politicians actually have an incentive *not* to end abortion because that would also end our political dependence on them and deprive them of an easy source of reliable votes? Some interviewees worried this was the case, while others did not, and it warrants further exploration and debate.

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND THE GOSPEL

Another issue loomed large in our interviews: racial justice and racial reconciliation. While only 11 percent of white evangelicals listed racial justice as a top concern, 44 percent of black Protestants did, and the issue weighed heavily on the evangelical leaders we interviewed. The gap between the leaders and the pews was strongly evident on this issue. Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week.

The gap is not about theology. We doubt many Christians seriously disagree any more that all humans, regardless of color or ethnic background, are made in God's image and bear equal dignity; or that we will rejoice in the company of people from every tongue, tribe, people and nation before God's throne (Revelation 7:9). There is of course a past history of overt, public alliance between Christian nationalism and white supremacy in the United States, particularly in the Confederacy and the Jim Crow system of apartheid segregation in the American South. Thankfully, that shameful linkage is now a fraction of its former self. (Even so, it would benefit white evangelicals to become more well-acquainted with this history to help them understand how American history and American identity looks to non-white Americans).²⁹

Rather, the gap is over what constitutes racism and racial injustice. As Michael Emerson and Christian Smith have argued, whites define racism as personal animus while non-whites tend to define racism as systemic or structural inequality. Whites do not feel they are motivated by personal

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²⁹ See, for example: Bradley, Anthony B, *Liberating Black Theology: the Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Mitchell, Henry H, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004). Mitchell, Henry H, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks and West Africa*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1975). Raboteau, Albert J, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

hatred of non-whites, and do not hear expressions of such hatred, and so they believe that racism is not a major problem in the United States today. Non-whites are more aware of history and observe the glaring and irrefutable evidence that whites and non-whites have starkly different life opportunities; that they are treated differently by the institutions of American life (like law enforcement); and that whites enjoy a position of privilege in society that belies our belief in meritocracy.

Our interviewees (from all racial and ethnic backgrounds) seemed to agree. Tim Keller suggested, “I think non-white people often feel more solidarity with the injustices of the past, and the reality is that non-white people... [have] almost daily or at least fairly regularly [an] experience of exclusion that white people just don’t experience.” Kristie Anyabwile shared that “For the most part, white people in America get to experience a great deal of privilege in this country that they are unaware of. People who are minorities...we know what the battle is on a daily basis to have to strive for simple things.” To non-whites, these facts of American life are proof of the enduring structural or systemic racism in the United States. Smith and Emerson argued that white evangelicals’ inclination to favor the status quo ensures they will work to replicate the existing conditions of society—which means replicating the existing racial inequalities of American life. White evangelicals do not *intend* to treat non-whites unfairly, but the actual effect of their bias in favor of the status quo is to perpetuate a system that favors themselves at the expense of others.³⁰

These racial and ethnic dynamics are not only present in American society at large; they are present in the church. Several of our interviewees were concerned about the ways in which predominately white churches unconsciously hold up a white cultural template as the norm to which everyone is expected to conform. Some churches subtly convey through music choice, liturgy, sermon style, and illustrations a conflation between the majority culture and biblical teaching; they fail to distinguish between what is biblically clear and what is culturally dominant. Bethany Jenkins worried that suburban, white churches filled with nuclear families had no place for singles and non-whites and usually didn’t even recognize the ways in which they culturally excluded people who fell outside the predominant demographic. She suggested that pastors should be careful with sermon illustrations that rely heavily on family life or TV shows popular only with white audiences, and should devote study time specifically to reading work from nonwhite authors and theologians.

Some whites, when reading the paragraphs above, may feel defensive or upset and become unwilling to engage in further discussion about race, Christianity, and American politics. But we ask

³⁰ Emerson, Michael O, and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

our readers to remember from Scripture that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). It can be extraordinarily difficult to recognize a needful rebuke when we hear it; we tend to deflect, shift blame, excuse or justify ourselves, or look at the speck of dust in our neighbor’s eye to avoid the plank in our own. That is why God gave us the gift of the church, the polity that merits our primary loyalty. Without the church, we are apt to reject rebuke out of hand, and Scripture warns us that “whoever hates reproof will die,” (Proverbs 15:10). With the love, exhortation, and accountability of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can hear words of rebuke and respond with contrition and repentance. “Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life,” (Proverbs 10:17). Non-white Christians have been trying to speak a loving rebuke to their white brothers and sisters in Christ about troubling aspects of white politics in America.

Whites may be unaware of how their actions help reinforce racial inequalities in American society, and they probably would not even be aware of any racial animus in their own motives if such motives were present. Jonathan Leeman believed that, “whites, at best, have been negligent in empathizing and showing concern for the issues felt acutely by our minority brothers and sisters in Christ and minorities more broadly. Cook, the Memphis pastor, cautioned, “There is a way in which the majority culture has viewed the world where any dissenting opinion from how they view it will feel like a lack of civility.” Thabiti Anyabwile, again, believed that too often we paper over our differences in the name of unity, that “unity has come at the expense of hard conversations,” about difficult things like race and politics that we should talk about.

The gap between whites and non-whites has been exacerbated in recent years, especially since the 2016 election. When Donald Trump promised during the campaign to “Make America Great *Again*,” some non-whites heard a call to return to a time of unquestioned white privilege. How does this work? Consider Smith and Emerson’s argument: the status quo in American history long favored whites. Promising to return America to its past felt, to many non-whites, like a promise to reinforce the old racial hierarchy. Danny Akin remarked, “[America] might have been great for white folks like me but America wasn’t always great for some people.”

It is important to note that Trump did not make an explicit appeal to white identity (though some of his advocates and campaign staff did)—he more often made an appeal to Christian identity—but equally important to note that his political movement is overwhelmingly made up of whites, while non-whites overwhelmingly suspected what they believed were the racial and ethnic implications of his campaign. Thabiti Anyabwile shared that “I’ve never seen a cultural event like the 2016 election that divided the church.” White evangelicals who supported Trump did not believe he was

racist or that their support for him was support for racism. But it became increasingly difficult for non-white Christians to give their white brothers and sisters who supported Trump the benefit of the doubt. Bruce Ashford suggested “a number of white folks don’t understand,” non-whites’ fears about Trump, “because they never had black people in their home or Hispanics in their home. And if you don’t have people in your home you don’t know them you don’t understand how afraid—not just offended, but afraid—they are.”

Identity politics are infectious: the more one group makes group identity central, the more other groups (including whites) will do the same out of necessity.

The racial and ethnic dynamics surrounding the Trump campaign and presidency are complicated because, again, Trump rarely, if ever, has spoken *explicitly* about racial issues or appealed to whites as *whites*. Instead, he directed his appeal to Christians. In June 2016 he told the Faith and Freedom Coalition “We will respect and defend Christian Americans.”³¹ In August 2016, he told a group of Christian pastors in Orlando, “Your power has been totally taken away,” but under a Trump administration, “You’ll have great power to do good things.”³² In September 2016, Trump told the Values Voters Summit, “[In] a Trump administration, our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you’ve never seen before. Believe me.”³³

Trump’s appeal to Christianity did not resonate with all American Christians, but it appears to have resonated strongly with a subset of them: white evangelicals. Why did the appeal to Christian identity appeal to that group?

The appeal to Christian identity was so successful probably because similar appeals to other groups have been a standard part of public discourse for the past half-century, from women’s rights and gay rights to an ever-expanding menu of hyphenated identities proliferating in progressive discourse (which has focused in recent years on how identity is formed at the “intersection” of

³¹ Donald Trump, “Remarks at Faith and Freedom Coalition Conference,” June 10, 2016.

³² Donald Trump, “Remarks in Orlando, Florida,” August 11, 2016.

³³ Donald Trump, “Values Voter Summit Remarks,” September 9, 2017.

different categories, e.g., race and gender, or gender and class). Under the banner of conservatism, the political right largely abstained from appeals to identity politics prior to 2016 and claimed to speak a more principled, non-tribal language (though they were often accused, sometimes credibly, of coded appeals to white identity). Conservative intellectuals used to criticize identity politics, especially what they saw as the excesses of campus activism and in the gender and ethnic studies departments at many American universities, but their arguments largely failed to gain traction outside of their epistemic community.³⁴ Until 2016, the white evangelicals who were a major voting block on the right thus did not have an advocate for themselves as *Christians*, but only as fellow-travelers for the ideology of conservatism. By 2016, many had lost faith that conservatism, whatever it was, represented their interests anymore.

Ironically, the right has adopted identity politics just as several prominent intellectuals have started to question its philosophical foundations and what they view as the extremism of its practice. Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama have both recently issued warnings that identity politics undermine democracy by fragmenting the electorate, eroding a sense of shared citizenship, and pitting groups against one another in a competition for prestige rather than a pursuit of equal justice for all.³⁵ And identity politics are infectious: the more one group makes group identity central, the more other groups (including whites) will do the same out of necessity. For example, some studies have shown that the more whites are treated as white, told that they are white, and blamed for racism towards non-whites, the more they accept white identity and make it an important part of their social and political persona.³⁶ In that way, identity politics can be counterproductive.

Finally, identity politics are another facet of the kind of public discourse we noted at the beginning of this report: entering the public square to advocate for one's own group is, in a sense, an abandonment of any effort to persuade the other side. It accepts politics as a simple contest for power and spoils rather than a common pursuit of justice, pitting tribe against tribe to see who can

³⁴ For the most recent example, see Heather MacDonald, *The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018).

³⁵ Lilla, Mark, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2017). Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, (London: Macmillan Publishers, 2018).

³⁶ Major, Brenda, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich, "The threat of increasing diversity: Why many White Americans support Trump in the 2016 presidential election," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21, no. 6 (2018): 931-940. See also Emily Bazelon, "White People Are Noticing Something New: Their Own Whiteness," *New York Times*, June 13, 2018.

win more from the public coffer. Identity politics thrive when people are fearful of attacks on their identities; politicians can succeed by deliberately fueling that fear and stoking resentment against other groups. This is precisely the critique that many conservatives, including many Christians, advanced against various identity-based movements on the left in previous years.

The United States is grappling with how to balance unity with diversity. The Christian public witness can speak directly to this dilemma. We understand from Scripture that we are all made in the image of God and bear equal dignity, regardless of our race, gender, ethnicity, or language. There is, at bottom, an essential sameness to all human beings, a universal nature inherent to us all. Jesus (a Middle Eastern, non-white, Aramaic- and Hebrew-speaking man) welcomes all who trust in him: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” (Galatians 3:28). At the same time, God created and values human diversity. He made the nations (Acts 17:26) and calls “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” to worship him (Revelation 7:9). Amidst our universal humanity, God has ordained that we enjoy and display a picture of diversity that reflects the universal and infinitely varied nature of his being.³⁷

The world will never reflect this balance perfectly. There will always be sin-laced movements that err on the side of excessive particularity and tribalism, including identity politics, nationalism, Islamism, and fascism—just as there will always be sin-saturated movements that seek an illusory and dangerous universalism, such as socialism, progressivism, and some versions of liberalism.³⁸ To recognize this is not a recipe for despair: we know that no secular polity will ever embody perfect justice. In our public witness we are called to discern the times, recognize which danger is closer, and bear witness to a better way.

Meanwhile, there is a place that can and should show the world what unity in diversity looks like. The church can embody this unity in diversity because, through Jesus and by his Spirit, we have received new hearts. We represent what redeemed humanity can be. We join together across racial,

³⁷ Piper, John, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christians*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

³⁸ For a secular (and pessimistic) discussion of the universal vs. particular divide in world politics, see Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010). Barber argues that liberalism and especially capitalism belong in the category of dangerous universalism. Patrick Deneen advances a similar criticism in *Why Liberalism Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). For a more sympathetic take on classical liberalism, see Jonah Goldberg, *The Suicide of the West*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018). Liberalism can deteriorate into a universalistic progressivism but, at its best, liberalism claims to be the system of anti-utopianism, a set of institutions that works against both our perennial impulses towards tribalism and universalism alike.

ethnic, and national lines—not to lose ourselves or our identities, but to have them redeemed and renewed through Jesus. The global church is a timeless and universal gathering of all believers across cultural, ethnic, and national lines called together in Jesus.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

We asked our interviewees and our poll respondents about religious liberty because it is a core component of Baptist political theology, a vital practical issue to Christians worldwide, and a cornerstone of American democracy. Given that, we were somewhat dismayed at how few poll respondents listed it among their top concerns. Just one-third of all evangelicals placed it as a top concern, falling to 28 percent of the youngest cohort and 13 percent of black Protestants. Whites, older respondents, those with graduate degrees, and those who attend church at least once per week were more likely to list it as a top concern.

Reassuringly, the evangelical leaders we spoke to strongly recognized the importance of the issue. “Religious liberty is the quintessential firewall against secular totalitarianism,” according to Samuel Rodriguez. It is “fundamental to all other liberties,” as Jim Daly, President of Focus on the Family, characterized it. “Religious liberty is one of the things that keeps government in its place,” according to Trevin Wax. Cherie Harder argued, “You don’t have just, free societies without freedom of religion.” The leaders also agreed that most Christians probably do not understand the theological reasoning behind religious liberty and may not truly support religious liberty for non-Christians. (“Religious liberty for me but not for thee,” as one put it). However, two things surprised us: first, when asked, some leaders themselves struggled to articulate the biblical and theological foundations for religious liberty. Second, among the leaders, white evangelicals placed more emphasis on the issue than black Protestants.

The theological case for religious liberty is that God has not authorized government to enforce right worship of himself, and that true belief cannot be coerced. God authorized government to enforce order and do justice to the extent possible (Genesis 9 and Romans 13). “Governments simply do not have the authority to criminalize blasphemy and false religion,” as Jonathan Lee-man told us, echoing his recent book, *Political Church*. The institution commissioned to carry out right worship of God is the church, not the state. Nor does the Bible give us normative examples of coercion in matters of belief. Our conversion to Christ is a matter of an inward disposition of the heart, something that cannot be achieved by an act of government. (Ancient Israel is a model for the church, not the state; its practice of punishing heresy is an example for churches to enforce membership and practice discipline, not for the state to privilege Christianity or punish

atheism or Islam). Religious belief is not within the rightful jurisdiction of the government or its police powers, as authorized and commissioned by God.

There are other, pragmatic reasons to support religious liberty. We enjoy the freedom to meet openly, preach the gospel, proselytize, and organize good works to serve the community through our churches, and we pray for that freedom to continue. We can also agree with some (not all) of the Enlightenment justification for religious liberty, including that we all benefit from a free marketplace of ideas. A culture of intellectual and religious freedom seems to benefit society

We should also ensure our advocacy for religious liberty is truly principled, not only deployed when our particular interest is at stake.

as a whole by allowing innovation and entrepreneurship, attracting people of all religious backgrounds to live and work together, and fostering a spirit of debate and discussion. Some political scientists have argued forcefully that the lack of religious liberty is highly correlated with political violence and repression.³⁹ Religious liberty may also help us hold onto our religious beliefs more firmly if it means we have to contend for it against criticism and competitors in a marketplace of ideas. As J. S. Mill famously argued, unchallenged convictions are dead dogma; our religious beliefs

are more alive and more truly held when we encounter challenges to them.⁴⁰ (Though some interviewees pointed out that the opposite is also often true: that our faith is strengthened by oppression and persecution).

But these reasons are subordinate to the primary biblical reason to support religious liberty: that God has not authorized government to regulate, police, or enforce right worship of himself. This is true regardless of its pragmatic benefits and it was true before Enlightenment philosophers invented a secular argument for it. This insight is the great contribution of Baptist political thought to Christianity and, indeed, to the world, central to the work of Baptist divines like Thomas Helwys (1575 – 1616), John Smith (1570 – 1612), Roger Williams (1603 – 1683),

³⁹ Grim, Brian J., and Roger Finke: *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty*, (1859).

and John Leland (1754 – 1841). The theological case for religious liberty is why it is a vital issue. Guarding the church’s freedom and the limits of state authority is vital for the purity and independence of the church.

And that is as true for black churches as for white ones. We recognize that the concept of religious freedom was abused to persecute black Christians in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some slavers opposed allowing enslaved Africans to convert to Christianity because they feared (rightly) that Christianity would lead them to advocate for their freedom. Others worked to develop a theology of slavery that presented it as a justified and even beneficial institution. Even within black congregations, whites often exercised oversight and control, limiting blacks’ religious autonomy. As a result, “religious freedom is but a minor theme in the broader cultural vocabulary of black Protestantism.”⁴¹ When African Americans encountered the theme of liberty in the Bible, their immediate application was to secure their liberty from slavery, not liberty from religious persecution.⁴² Jemar Tisby recognized that “religious liberty in the black Christian tradition hardly comes up or at least hardly comes up in the same way,” as it does in the white evangelical tradition. When early colonial Americans talked about the importance of religious liberty, they mostly had in mind the freedom of white Protestants not to obey the British-controlled Anglican Church; only later did Christians begin to apply the principle more consistently. While we lament this history, we nonetheless wish to affirm in love that the abuse of a principle does not invalidate its proper use, and that the principle of religious liberty is biblically sound and politically essential.

Some evangelicals and Catholics have warned about the erosion of religious liberty in the United States.⁴³ We are especially concerned by recent moves among progressives to reframe and circumscribe the First Amendment, claiming that evangelicals are abusing or “manipulating” it to shield our supposed “bigotry” against the LGBTQ community.⁴⁴ If these arguments gain ground, churches’ tax exempt status might be endangered—even our legal right to form associations with

⁴¹ Harris, Steven, “The Black Church, Race, and Religious Freedom: A Historical Account,” a paper presented at the ERLC Research Institute Annual Summit, October 2018, Dallas, TX.

⁴² Wenger, Tisa, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁴³ Eberstadt, Mary, *It’s Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies*, (New York: Harper, 2016).

⁴⁴ Bianco, Marcie, “Karen Pence, LGBTQ discrimination and the Christian right’s embrace of victimhood,” [NBC-news.com](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/karen-pence-lgbtq-discrimination-christian-right-s-embrace-victimhood-ncna961066), January 22, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/karen-pence-lgbtq-discrimination-christian-right-s-embrace-victimhood-ncna961066>

membership criteria that requires adherence to traditional Christian sexual morality might be at risk. We agree with Bruce Ashford that the freedom of religion “cannot be restricted to freedom of inner worship. It must necessarily extend beyond private beliefs and local church worship services.”⁴⁵ We encourage and exhort fellow Christians and all Americans to safeguard religious liberty as an issue of paramount importance. (Interestingly, the issue of same-sex marriage rarely came up in our interviews or research. Evangelicals appear to have refocused attention elsewhere. Instead, evangelicals are working to reinforce religious liberty as a safeguard that allows us to maintain the integrity of our faith and sustain religious institutions amidst a culture that has largely decided to adopt a post-Christian approach to most social issues).

However, several of our interviewees rightly noted that religious freedom at home is still extraordinarily robust compared to the plight of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. Saudi converts to Christianity face literal martyrdom. Chinese Christians meet in underground house churches and risk arrest. Christians in India face harassment and discrimination. We are right to defend religious liberty in the United States (and we note that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in favor of religious liberty protections in several recent high-profile cases), but we would do well to have a global perspective.⁴⁶

We should also ensure our advocacy for religious liberty is truly principled, not only deployed when our particular interest is at stake. Mark Noll rightly argued “If a person really believes in religious liberty, it has to be as true for religions with which you disagree as for those you yourself embrace.” Bethany Jenkins referenced Martin Niemöller’s famous challenge, “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist...” to emphasize the necessity of defending others. Cherie Harder warned against turning religious liberty into a “code word” that actually meant protections for our own values against others. David Kinnaman believed that evangelicals had lost sight of the importance of truly principled religious liberty; instead, there are “older Christians who simply want to have preferential treatment for evangelicalism,” and “younger evangelicals who don’t understand why it would be that we would want to have Christian institutions,” whose liberty we need to protect.

The case for religious liberty applies equally to Muslims. It applies to Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. Sikhs, Bahai, and Christian Scientists are not exempted. We should defend the religious freedom of

⁴⁵ Ashford and Pappalardo, *One Nation*, Location 25-6.

⁴⁶ Shortt, Rupert, *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

Methodists, but also atheists and agnostics too. While Baptists can be proud of our principled and historic stand in favor of religious liberty for all, Americans broadly have a spotty track record defending religious liberty for those outside the broad tent of Protestantism. Muslims today are roughly in the position that Jews and Catholics were in the 19th century and earlier. Religious liberty for some is not true religious liberty; once the government limits the freedom of one group, it has set a legal precedent that will someday be used against other groups. More importantly, we again affirm that the Bible has not authorized us to use the government to enforce or privilege our beliefs. Distressingly, our poll showed that only two-thirds of evangelicals believe it is important to advocate for religious liberty for Muslims and other non-Christians. We exhort our pastors and congregations: *that number should be 100 percent.*

THE CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

A final issue, or two tightly connected issues, surfaced in conversation with some of our interviewees: the overall culture of democracy in America, coupled with evangelicals' misunderstanding of the relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of God. The first issue is relatively straightforward: Among our top priorities should be safeguarding a system of ordered liberty in which human beings can thrive. But the second issue is complex: evangelicals often have a mistaken understanding of what that system is, or what it takes to keep such a system healthy and functional. They wrongly assume that American democracy functions because, they say, America is a Christian nation; and that sustaining American democracy is thus a matter of privileging Christianity in the public square. Ironically, that approach has the opposite effect intended, actually *harming* the culture of American democracy.

On the first issue, some interviewees suggested that the basic functioning of democratic institutions should be understood as a top priority, both because of its intrinsic worth as a political system built around human dignity and because it is a precondition for our ability to pursue justice within any other area of public policy. Michael Wear listed the “culture of our politics” and “basic functioning of our democratic institutions” as among the top issues Christians should be concerned about. Thabiti Anyabwile concurred, listing the integrity of “government institutions and constitutional authority,” and the “rule of law” among top-tier issues. The American system of government, variously characterized as liberal democracy or constitutional republicanism, essentially boils down to majority rule plus minority protections. As some Christian political theorists have argued, this system can be defended on biblical grounds in several ways: it has proven the best system ever devised for protecting human dignity; it truly reflects our status as both ruled and

rulers in creation; it gives us agency in our own government; and it reflects appropriate distrust of concentrations of power among sinful humans by building in checks, balances, and jurisdictional limitations on government.⁴⁷ Christians should understand the defense and improvement of democracy in America as a paramount issue in their public engagement.

Some of our interviewees warned that the culture of democracy in America is ailing or imperiled because of many of the themes covered in this report. Trevin Wax compared our current moment to performing surgery to remove cancer with infected instruments. Some of President Trump's critics have warned that the

Trying to root American democracy in one particular identity, even a Christian identity, fundamentally misunderstands the ideals of the American experiment.

downsides of the current administration is its effect on American political culture. Matthew Lee Anderson shared that “a lot of the concerns [about Trump] are broader, cultural...about the way in which the atmosphere and the ethos of the presidency through this person has changed.” Alternatively, one of the reasons that the culture of democracy may be imperiled is because Americans take it for granted. It is a background condition behind all our other political disputes, and so it is easy to overlook.

We rarely notice the air we breathe until it is so polluted as to threaten our health.

One reason democracy works, and that its maintenance is so important, is that it is the institutionalization of reciprocal trust and altruism in political life from which we all directly benefit. We (rightly) desire freedom and equality for ourselves. The bargain of democracy is that we extend liberty and equality to others in exchange for the same in return. The bargain breaks down once we start making exceptions or picking certain groups to exclude. The defense of anyone's rights is a defense of everyone's rights. We earlier argued that Christians must defend the religious liberty of all, in part because of the dangerous precedent of selectively allowing its infringement against unpopular groups. The same holds for all democratic norms. Christians should be at the forefront

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Tinder, Glenn, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000).

of defending all democratic rights and privileges for all citizens because our own freedom is at stake. That includes the legitimate rights even of those with whom we disagree on major political or cultural issues. We may disagree with their values, their lifestyles, or their political agendas, but we must nonetheless advocate for them when justice demands it—both because justice is blind and because our love for our neighbors should be selfless and sacrificial, not preferential and self-interested. Cherie Harder argued that “if we are called to love of God and love our neighbor, it should not be a matter of indifference to us whether our neighbor lives in a free system or a deeply oppressive one. It should not be a matter of indifference to us whether justice reigns or there is violence, oppression, authoritarianism, and injustice everywhere.”

The institutions of democracy depend on certain social, cultural, and economic conditions to thrive, like respect for the rule of law, honesty, an ethic of voter participation, and more. Unfortunately, American Christians have often operated under a misguided theory of what those preconditions are. This is where the second issue comes in. There is a long tradition of American Christian thought that argues the preconditions of democracy are either British culture or Protestant Christianity, or both. That viewpoint confuses the origins of liberal democracy (in 18th century Protestant Britain) with its necessary preconditions. Neither Britishness nor Protestantism are necessary for democracy to exist, to which a widespread and robust tradition of non-western democracy attests.⁴⁸ And the viewpoint is not only wrong, it is damaging: at its worst, this line of thinking exaggerates the importance of (white) British culture and can lead to white supremacy, as we’ve already discussed.

But even the more benign form of this argument, emphasizing Christianity rather than British culture, results in a kind of Christian nationalism that ends up *harming*, not helping, democracy in America. It is harmful in several ways. This viewpoint can end up harming the principle of religious freedom by trying to give Christianity a legal preference—which is helpful for neither the church nor the state. This view can also devolve into a form of identity politics for Christians, which is a fundamentally selfish form of politics: if Christians should be known for loving their neighbors and working for the common flourishing of all, asking for privileged status for ourselves does the opposite.

Finally, this view often gets mixed up and articulated together with a view that the United States is, was, or should be a “Christian nation,” and that we must reclaim our American Chris-

⁴⁸ Miller, Paul D, “Non-Western Democracy and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2018.

tian heritage to resolve our intractable political debates. In this view, the United States' Christian heritage is part of what made America into what it is, and if we want to revive democracy in America, we must advocate for a revival of Christianity in America. In some versions of this argument, America's Christian heritage and its role as a force for good in the world is seen as providential, even suggesting that the United States' occupies a special place in God's plan for history.

We are grateful that Christianity played an important and influential role in American history and culture and motivated the political worldviews of many (not all) of the Founders. The United States would indeed be better off with a revival of Christianity and a true and winsome Christian public witness today. But it would be better off because a greater depth of commitment to God's design for human lives would organically preclude many of the social and political problems we face, not because a revival would lead to a Christian takeover of government. The idea that the United States was or should strive to be defined as a Christian nation, or that being a Christian nation will solve our political crisis, or that we should strive for the Christianization of government, has several problems with it. First, as evangelical historians have recently argued, whether America could accurately be characterized as a "Christian nation" in the past is historically fraught (most obviously because it allowed and perpetuated many blatantly un-Christian acts, like slavery).⁴⁹

Second, setting history aside, a political agenda of making America into a Christian nation is politically counterproductive. It is simplistic to assume that our various political issues would be easily or smoothly resolved following a revival of Christianity in America, especially considering how rarely Christians agree among ourselves about politics. There are far more, and more complex, dynamics at work (as covered in this report) that have brought our current political crisis about than a simple tale of America's spiritual decline and fall. In the meantime, trying to root American democracy in one particular identity, even a Christian identity, fundamentally misunderstands the ideals of the American experiment. It would serve to *undermine*, not strengthen, democracy in America by exacerbating our culture war and trying, fruitlessly, to work against the established pluralism of American life in favor of an illiberal, "Christian" solution. A healthy culture for democracy in American will include Christians who are comfortable with and supportive of "confident pluralism," and "faithful presence."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Fea, John, *Was America Founded as a Christian National? Revised Edition: A Historical Introduction*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). Wilsey, John D, *One Nation Under God? An Evangelical Critique of Christian America*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011). Noll, Mark A, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1983).

But that is not the biggest danger of the effort to turn America into a Christian nation. In addition to misunderstanding American ideals, it is theologically problematic. This view has sometimes led Christians to believe, implicitly or otherwise, that the United States is providentially chosen or guided by God for a special purpose. Older generations of American evangelicals quite clearly and repeatedly expressed a belief that America was a “new Israel” commissioned by God to be an agent of special mission in the world.⁵¹ American Christians have sometimes acted as if the sole or paramount political implication of the Christian faith was to strive for the glory and strength, not of the Kingdom of God, but of the United States. Indeed, some have confused the two.

This approach represents a failure to understand the role of secular government. The United States is indeed commissioned by God—no more so than every government on earth is commissioned in Romans 13 to uphold order and execute justice. It also leads evangelicals to a tiresome oscillation between two extremes: on the one hand, when we overestimate America’s righteousness, we fall prey to national chauvinism and triumphalism and become insensitive to America’s sins and to those on the receiving end of such sins. On the other hand, precisely because we expect moral perfection, we can lurch in the opposite direction and become prone to overwrought discouragement, bitterness, and apathy when we come face-to-face with the reality of sin that is, in truth, sadly normal for nations in the world and has always been part of American history.

The work of democratic citizenship and public engagement is not the work of church planting or discipleship. It is more akin to the cultural mandate of Genesis 2:15 than the Great Commission of Matthew 28. God has given us stewardship over creation and commands us to “tend and keep” what we have been given. We tend and keep the public square through our faithful presence, our persistent witness, our voice for justice for the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, and the poor. We tend and keep the public square by attending to the institutions, norms, habits, and traditions of ordered liberty. Of course, insofar as we succeed in advancing justice, this earthly kingdom will come to bear slight resemblance to the true Kingdom of perfect justice, but we will never turn the one into the other—and it is profoundly dangerous to try. Advocating for justice while keeping this distinction in mind is less a matter of who we vote for than how we treat our neighbors when we

⁵⁰ Inazu, John D, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). Hunter, James Davison, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵¹ Cherry, Conrad, (ed.), *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

meet them in the public square. We cite again Alan Jacobs, who called for us to think about politics, “not in the sense of policies or who to vote for, but politics in the much broader sense: what does it mean to be a political animal? What does it mean to be someone who is in the midst of a vast and complex society full of people who disagree with you in all sorts of ways? And what does it mean to be faithful and Christian in that world?” We love our neighbors politically when we act in such a way as to preserve a just and lasting peace within and among nations. This is not the work of building the Kingdom of God—which has already been built and will be inaugurated when Jesus returns—but of honoring our King with the (political) work of our hands.

We should of course call all people to the gospel—*because it is the gospel*, not because of the political implications it may have. The gospel is intrinsically valuable; if we share the gospel only because we believe it is instrumentally valuable for our political goals, we are sharing a false gospel. We should continue to call people to the gospel even if we discover someday that it has no impact whatsoever, or even a negative impact, on the future of democracy in America. To do otherwise would be a failure of citizenship: both our American citizenship and, of far greater consequence, our citizenship in heaven. It would be a failure to honor Jesus, to recognize that his kingdom is “not of this world,” and that his kingdom is far larger and greater than the United States will ever be.



3

INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS



We sketch here an initial draft of recommendations to structure future conversations. We do not mean to bind the conscience of any believer and we recognize that most of the issues we address here lie in the realm of wisdom and prudence. We put forward these ideas as the best practices from what we have seen, observed, and heard during this project. These are not rules for righteousness, but practices of discipleship and character formation we think are uniquely suited to the challenges of the age we are living through.

FOR THE FAMILY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

1. Get news from print media.

It is good civic hygiene to stay informed about current events. TV and social media are very bad at this. They seem better suited to entertainment and superficial connection with friends, respectively. Avoid TV news and talk shows, subscribe to a newspaper or news magazine, and *do not debate politics over Facebook or Twitter*. Do not use late-night comedy or YouTube shows as your primary sources of news. Print media do not avoid bias, but they do engage our minds more actively, helping us to assess and filter out bias. Text is also less emotional and less sensational than the image-based media of TV and most social media. Debate politics with passion, but do so face-to-face with your friends, colleagues, and neighbors, not over the internet.

2. Put down your smart phone, and don't give them to kids.

Smart phones are powerful and useful devices. They can also be addictive, overpowering, and ruinous to human interaction because they are a source of constant distraction. Do not have your phone out during conversation, at mealtimes, and while hosting others. Be present while you are with others; give them the gift of your full attention and focus. Consider a technology fast once a week (at least). And train your children to have discipline and self-control with the technology they will encounter. Parents can be tempted to use smartphones and tablets as “electronic babysitters,” but they should be aware of the growing body of research linking early and regular use of such devices to problems with attention, focus, anxiety, and depression.

3. Teach your children the importance of gracious social interaction, even if it seems old-fashioned.

Lessons such as “remember your manners,” “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19), “a gentle answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1), and “be kind” (Ephesians 4:32) are preparing children not just for kindergarten but for interacting with social media and for Christian political engagement.

4. Get involved locally, and drop roots, for however long you can.

Go to your local parent-teacher association, city council, or home owner’s association. Join a veteran’s group, a bird-watching club, or a neighborhood chess night. Join or coach a sports team. Do something that physically gets you out of your house and into face-to-face contact with people who live in your immediate vicinity. We move and change jobs and careers more often than our parents and grandparents, one result of which is that we increasingly live less rooted lives, make fewer friendships, and invest less in our communities. To counter that, invite someone—anyone—over to dinner once each month. Involve your neighbors in your holiday traditions. Use your imagination: do anything that increases your contact with other human beings and decreases your isolation.

5. Seek out difference.

If your friends are of the same race or ethnicity, the same political party, or the same income and education level as you are, you live in a bubble and are depriving yourself of the opportunity to grow. Go make friends and seek out those from whom you might learn something new.

6. Try not to have opinions about everything.

We are blessed to live in a country where we can believe and say anything. That doesn’t mean we should. Nor does it mean that whatever we say or believe has automatic validity. Learn and study before forming an opinion; if someone disagrees, ask why and listen. Do not rush to ascribe malice, foolishness, or stupidity to someone just because they disagree with you.

7. Join a church, pray for the nation, and remember they are different.

Our churches are our most important communities outside of our families because they are the company of saints helping us along our pilgrim path to the Celestial City. If you spend more time worrying about America than about the family in the pew next to you, you are doing it wrong. Remember that “the nations are like a drop in the bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isaiah 40:15).

FOR THE CHURCH AND SEMINARY

1. Seek out difference.

If your church members or seminary students are all of the same race or ethnicity, the same political party, or the same income and education level—and especially if your demographic makeup is disproportionate to your neighborhood or your city—you have created a bubble and are depriving yourself and your members of the opportunity to grow. Ask a fellow believer of a different background to examine your church to see if you have wrongly conflated your culture with biblical teaching. Consider changes in your church's or seminary's programming, liturgy, music, service, or outreach to better reach people from all backgrounds. You are likely to encounter opposition if you do so, but responding to that opposition is precisely when you have the opportunity to emphasize the difference between your majority culture and the gospel of Jesus.

We are blessed to live in a country where we can believe and say anything. That doesn't mean we should.

2. Talk about politics—but talk about it holistically.

The gospel has political implications. Do not avoid politics and do not avoid controversy. Doing so only cedes the ground to secular sources of commentary. Your members and students will hear about politics somewhere, so you should be a part of the conversation. When you address controversial issues, you are likely to be the only or the best place that models to your congregation how to talk about such issues with truth, grace, wisdom, and compassion. But be careful of talking about only your favorite political issues. If abortion or religious liberty are the only political issues you ever mention from the pulpit or in the classroom, you probably have a blind spot. The same is true if race or poverty are the only political issues you discuss. Be especially attentive to teaching about human dignity and human flourishing. Teach a full, complete political theology, one that reminds us that we will never achieve complete or perfect justice in this world. Teach the doctrine of civil government: that government is ordained by God to keep order and execute justice, but that government also has limits ordained by God.

3. Don't just talk about politics.

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, to reflect the character of God, and to carry out his mission of reconciliation and renewal to the world. If political activism has become your primary focus, you have lost your focus and your political talk will eventually become shallow, partisan, or uncharitable.

4. Experiment with different methods of teaching.

For many churches, the Sunday morning sermon is the only means by which it seeks to transmit knowledge, wisdom, and exhortation to its members. But a 30- to 60-minute lecture once per week is inadequate to help form the worldview and lifelong habits of a people. Churches and seminaries might try supplementing the sermon, as resources permit, with adult Sunday school classes, discussion groups centered around a book, small groups that meet during the week, service to the community (because oftentimes we learn by doing, not by hearing or studying), podcasts, book stalls, voter education, and more.

5. Foster civil society in and around the church, but don't let it replace the gospel.

Form partnerships with local organizations, or create your own, like veteran's groups, scouting organizations, neighborhood schools, tutoring programs, prison ministries, homeless shelters, and others. Advertise their events and encourage your members to get involved. Offer the use of your building as a meeting space, if you have one. You can organize, fund, or endorse such activities if you have the resources and time. Just as usefully, however, you can make it a point to just be aware of such organizations, share the information, and share space when possible. Make your church part of the rhythm of activity in your neighborhood to make it easier for your members to get involved and make it easier for your neighborhood to get to know you. Be the polity that we want to see in the world. If churches choose to organize programs devoted to meeting specific needs, such as a crisis pregnancy center, participants would benefit if their churches are able to explain why this church is suited to meet *this* need.

6. Model the life of the mind.

Teach your members what it means to love God with our minds. Preach against anti-intellectualism. Hold up wisdom as a model and an aspiration. Have a bookstall or library stocked with quality books. If you have the resources, consider programs to fund seminary studies for your members. Invite members in your congregation whom God has gifted in this area to speak or to organize an event.

APPENDIX A: ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

DR. PAUL D. MILLER, LEAD RESEARCHER

Dr. Miller is a Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at Georgetown University. Dr. Miller served in the U.S. government for a decade, including in the U.S. Army, the intelligence community, and in the White House in the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Dr. Miller writes widely on international affairs, political theory, culture, and theology. His most recent book, *American Power and Liberal Order*, was published by Georgetown University Press in 2016. His writing has also appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *First Things*, *The National Interest*, *The American Interest*, *Survival*, *Orbis*, *The World Affairs Journal*, *Mere Orthodoxy*, *War on the Rocks*, the *Washington Post*, and elsewhere. He holds a PhD in political science from Georgetown University and a Master in Public Policy from Harvard University. He is a contributing editor of the *Texas National Security Review*, a contributing editor of *Providence: A Journal of Christianity and American Foreign Policy*, and a research fellow at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. He is a member of Franconia Baptist Church in Springfield, Virginia.

DR. ANDREW WALKER

Andrew T. Walker is the Director of Research and Senior Fellow in Christian Ethics at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the denomination's entity tasked with equipping Christians and local churches to address ethical issues facing society and the church. In his role, he researches, speaks, and writes about the intersection of Christian ethics, public policy, and the church's social witness. His writing and commentary have appeared in such outlets as *National Review*, *Public Discourse*, *First Things*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and elsewhere. He serves as the Director of the ERLC's Research Institute, and also as a Research Fellow.

BRENT LEATHERWOOD

Brent Leatherwood currently serves as the ERLC director of strategic partnerships. He attended the University of Central Florida and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Government. He has served in both the public sector and private sector. Brent has recently served as the Executive Director of the Tennessee Republican Party as well as led communica-

tions outreach for the House Majority in the Tennessee General Assembly. He has also worked with small businesses and non-profit in Tennessee to increase their media outreach.

PALMER WILLIAMS

A Founding Partner of The Peacefield Group, Palmer Williams specializes in legal and policy analysis related to international human rights, sanctity of life, non-profit operations and government affairs. As a licensed attorney knowledgeable in international law, she has extensive experience advocating for human rights on the international stage, including at the United Nations. Additionally, she has worked with government agencies and faith-based organizations to launch statewide initiatives and grassroots organizing campaigns. She earned her Juris Doctor from Vanderbilt Law School and her B.A. in Political Science and Community Development from Vanderbilt University. Palmer also spent several years living and serving in sub-Saharan Africa, working with grassroots NGOs serving vulnerable children and victims of the HIV epidemic.

ALEX WARD

Alex Ward serves as the Research and Special Projects Associate at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. In his role he assists with research projects and helps facilitate academic initiatives in conjunction with the Director of Research and Senior Fellow in Christian Ethics. He also assists with operational needs within the Office of the President. He received a B.A. in English and Philosophy from Mississippi State University. He has also completed a Master of Theological Studies degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School.

SHARIF AZAMI

As the Lead Program Officer for the Fetzer Institute, Sharif Azami manages a portfolio of projects in the areas of democracy, faith, and spirituality. Additionally, he provides general support to develop the strategies of Fetzer and build the networks of the organization. Prior to joining Fetzer, Sharif served with CIDA, Oxfam GB, and the United Nations World Food Programme. Sharif earned a master's in International Development Policy and he holds a graduate certificate in Peace and Conflict Resolution.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWEES AND POLLING METHODOLOGY

The online survey of evangelicals was conducted November 14 –23, 2018. Respondents were screened to include both those with evangelical beliefs, and Protestant or nondenominational Christians who self-identify as evangelical. The two groups overlapped significantly, as we would expect, but there were small divergences because some people who profess evangelical beliefs nonetheless do not call themselves evangelicals. Quotas and slight weights were used for each group to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, and education. The completed sample included 1,317 surveys, including 933 with evangelical beliefs and 1,101 self-identified evangelicals. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed +3.6% for those with evangelical beliefs and +3.2% for self-identified evangelicals. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Evangelical Beliefs are defined using the NAE LifeWay Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents were asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Those who strongly agree with all four statements were categorized as having Evangelical Beliefs:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.

For our interviews with evangelical thought leaders, we aimed to identify those whom we believed would meet the Bebbington Quadrilateral definition of an evangelical based on their public statements or our knowledge of them, and who had a significant public platform from which they spoke, wrote, or taught about Christian theology and public affairs. We strove to include women and non-whites to ensure a diversity of backgrounds, with moderate success. We initially compiled a list of over 130 evangelical thought leaders and extended invitations to just over 100 of them.

Below is a list of those interviewed for this project. Their affiliations are listed for identification purposes only and do not imply institutional endorsement for their views or for this report. We drew widely on these interviews for the analysis in this report, but no interviewee read this report prior to publication. Their names here should not be construed as endorsement for any of our conclusions or for any part of the report.

Danny Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Matthew Lee Anderson, Research Fellow, Baylor University

Thabiti Anyabwile, Pastor, Anacostia River Church

Kristie Anyabwile, Author and Speaker

Bruce Ashford, Professor, Dean, and Provost, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Denny Burk, Professor, Boyce College

Rosaria Butterfield, Author and former professor, Syracuse University

Jason Cook, Associate Pastor, Fellowship Memphis

Andy Crouch, Partner for Theology and Culture, Praxis

Jim Daly, President, Focus on the Family

Byron Day, Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church

Karen A. Ellis, Doctoral Candidate, Oxford University

Michael Emerson, Provost, North Park University

Keri Folmar, Author

Donna Gaines, Author and Speaker

Wayne Grudem, Professor, Phoenix Seminary

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition

Cherie Harder, President, Trinity Forum

Cathi Herrod, President, Center for Arizona Policy

Michael Horton, Professor, Westminster Seminary California

Alan Jacobs, Professor, Baylor University

Bethany Jenkins, Vice President, The Veritas Forum

Tim Keller, Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

David Kinnaman, President, Barna Group

Duke Kwon, Lead Pastor, Grace Meridian Hill

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director, 9Marks

Beth Moore, Founder, Living Proof Ministries
Russell Moore, President, Ethics and Religious
Liberty Commission

Trillia Newbell, Author and Director of
Community Outreach, Ethics and Religious
Liberty Commission

O. Alan Noble, Assistant Professor,
Oklahoma Baptist University

Mark Noll, Research Professor,
Regent College

Marvin Olasky, Editor-in-Chief,
World Magazine

Ray Ortlund, Pastor, Emmanuel Church

Catherine Parks, Author

Adron Robinson, Senior Pastor, Hillcrest
Baptist Church

Samuel Rodriguez, President, National
Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

Kevin Smith, Executive Director, Baptist
Convention of Maryland and Delaware

Chelsea Sobolik, Author and
Policy Director, ERLC

Owen Strachan, Associate Professor,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary;
Director, Center for Public Theology

Karen Swallow Prior, Author and Professor,
Liberty University

Eric Teetsel, Former Executive Director,
Family Policy Alliance of Kansas

Jemar Tisby, President and Co-Founder,
The Witness: A Black Christian Collective

A.B. Vines, Senior Pastor,
New Seasons Church

Trevin Wax, Director for Bibles and
Reference, LifeWay Christian Resources

Michael Wear, Founder, Public Square Strategies

Peter J. Wehner, Senior Fellow, Ethics and
Public Policy Center

Afshin Ziafat, Lead Pastor,
Providence Church

APPENDIX C: LIST OF REVIEWERS

This report was peer reviewed by several scholars. This report is stronger for their input; any weaknesses or errors are our own. We gratefully acknowledge their help and again stress that their participation should not be construed as endorsement for any of our conclusions or for any part of the report.

Michael Emerson, Provost,
North Park University

John Fea, Professor, Messiah College

Thomas Kidd, Professor, Baylor University

George Marsden, Professor Emeritus,
University of Notre Dame

John Wilsey, Associate Professor, Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary

APPENDIX D: FURTHER READING

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