

# Peter Wehner's *On the Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump*

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(Page 61)

CHAPTER 4

## *Politics and Faith*

"I'm going to break (Pat) Buchanan's neck and leave him in the snow, without any footprints."

Those words, followed by a loud cackle, might sound like they came from a mafia don. In this case, however, they were said by Ralph Reed during a meeting with me and one other person at the offices of Empower America, leading up to the 1996 Republican primary.

Reed—at that time the boyish-looking, smooth-talking leader of the Christian Coalition—had been publicly respectful of Buchanan but privately opposed him and was a de facto supporter of Robert Dole. As Nina Easton point out in her book *Gang of Five*, Reed was not about to let a movement he had helped develop be hijacked by Buchanan.

Buchanan's stances were protectionist and nativist, his rhetoric divisive and exclusive, which was at odds with what Reed believed a successful Christian political movement should look like. And Buchanan's eagerness to weight in on issues like the Confederate flag, which inflamed racial tensions, made Reed uncomfortable. (Page 62) He wanted to refashion the evangelical movement away from the judgmental, off-putting attitudes of Jerry Falwell Sr. and Reed's boss, Pat Robertson. Yet Reed had to be careful, because Buchanan, although a Catholic, inspired a lot of evangelicals. He was a culture warrior par excellence.

In the end, Dole won the nomination. Buchanan's candidacy failed, but much of his agenda and approach to politics would eventually be embraced by, of all people, Donald Trump – a foul-mouthed, non-church-attending former casino owner and reality television star who once endorsed partial-birth abortion and was convincingly accused of paying hush money to cover up an affair with a porn star, which took place after his third wife gave birth to their son.

But not only did Buchanan win in the long run against Ralph Reed's vision of how Christians should engage politics; today, Reed is one of Trump's key allies, a bridge to the white evangelical world. The evangelical world has in turn rallied

around Trump, supporting him in greater numbers than it did George W. Bush, a lifelong conservative who spoke openly and easily about his relationship with Christ. As a result, white evangelicals got a seat at the table of power, something that in his life Jesus never did. But this ascent to power has come at a devastating cost to evangelicalism's moral integrity and credibility, damage that might take generations to heal, if it ever does. To put the case bluntly, evangelicals and others were correct to say that religion should inform politics—but they let their guard down against politics corrupting religion.

What happened? (*Page 63*)

## PROMISE AND PERIL

From Aristotle we learned that politics is both a necessary and an inherently moral enterprise since it is centered on a vision of what is good and what we should aspire to. Traditionally, many Americans have looked to Christianity to provide the language, values, and aspirations for how we define what is good and right for our nation. And so it's not at all surprising that in America, which throughout its history has been one of the more religious countries in the world, religion and politics would be intertwined.

Actually, "intertwined" is something of an understatement, because the dynamics between religion and politics in the United States is unique. Inspired by John Locke's ideas of tolerance and the limits of government, which were adapted and implemented here in America mostly through the creative work of James Madison in the Bill of Rights' First Amendment, America's combination of the separation between religion and politics alongside its protection of religious minorities has made it the exception among developed nations: a flourishing religious culture in which no one sect serves as the "established" faith for the nation.

This balancing act is one of our greatest achievements.

Still, precisely because of religions' centrality to our national culture, when religion is corrupted, it creates problems that extend beyond religion. It seeps into our political and cultural life—as we have seen in current events.

In this chapter, unlike the previous ones, I will be donning two hats, wearing my religious hat in addition to my political one. As is true for many Americans, I cannot easily separate these subjects, since what drives my sense of right, wrong, duty, wisdom, (*Page 64*) goodness, and care for others cannot be neatly separated into buckets, one marked "sacred" and the other "secular." To get

our politics right, it helps to get our religion right—and it is clear to many of us right now that neither side is getting things quite “right.”

Worries about the influence between religion and politics have been with us from the beginning of our history, including our recent history, and they go in both directions. From their inception in the 1970s, groups like the Moral Majority were viewed as judgmental, censorious, and selective in their concerns. Critics of the religious Right feared it wanted to impose a theocracy and was willing to use faith as a partisan cudgel. Dispensing God’s grace and redemptive love wasn’t the real agenda, critics claimed; it was about gaining and holding raw political power.

Over the last few years—particularly during the Trump years—concerns about how well faith and politics mix have been reinforced and deepened. Those who want there to be a great, even unbridgeable distance between faith and politics come from two very different points on the spectrum. There are some, often but not exclusively secularists, who believe religion is a grave threat to politics; and there are some, almost all of whom are Christians, who worry that entanglement with politics is doctrinally problematic and will corrupt faith.

Those in the former category make several arguments, including invoking the history of religious wars. Following Europe’s bloody wars of religion, Enlightenment figures such as John Locke (whom we met earlier in the book), and others in England, and on the European continent, argued that religion and politics needed to be separated, that (at most) faith belonged in the private but not the public sphere, and that mixing the two invariably (*Page 65*) leads to conflict. This was an understandable response to a particular historical moment.

The underlying danger, from this perspective, is that religious passions stir up political passions, which are difficult enough to control. Those who are religious believe they represent God’s side while their opponents represent Satan’s, which makes accommodation nearly impossible. It frames political disputes as between the children of the light and the children of darkness, between the righteous and the malevolent. Furthermore, this argument goes, religion is a license to discriminate, an engine of intolerance, repression, and mindless moralism.

From the other direction are those who insist that politics should be kept at a distance from religion to protect the purity of faith. Their views are rooted in part in theology, the belief that Jesus’s kingdom was not of this world and we are therefore called to be separated from it. Jesus was not a political figure, after all, and neither should we be.

This argument rests on the belief that the primary Christian contribution is to be a model for another kingdom, embodying “heavenly kingdom values” and not becoming entangled with the compromises inherent in dealing with the kingdoms of this world. They believe that if we take Jesus’s words literally we must abide an inevitable tension with life in this world, so the involvement needs to be minimized. Otherwise we are in danger of giving up Christian distinctiveness.

These concerns have some legitimacy; it’s not as if they have been invented out of nothing. Sometimes religion has had a pernicious influence on politics, and sometimes being involved in politics has damage integrity of faith. But there is also a [\(Page 66\)](#) different view to consider on this question—a more positive and constructive way to view the involvement of faith in public life.

## **BUILDING ON A FIRM FOUNDATION**

Despite the fact that our nation was formed right after Europe’s religious wars, most of the American founders—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, and others—argued that religion was essential in providing a moral basis for a free society. Typical was the sentiment of John Adams:

We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition, Revenge or Gallantry, would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our constitution is designed only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

Religion was, in the words of Jefferson, “a supplement of law in the government of men” and the “alpha and the omega of the moral law.” Washington put it this way: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”

To be sure, the key figures in the American founding opposed theocracy and wanted neutrality toward different religious sects. They supported the prohibition on religious establishment in the Constitution’s First Amendment. Yet they also believed religion played a useful private and public role and was even an essential [\(Page 67\)](#) element in education. There is simply no disputing that

religious faith shaped our national ideals, from the Puritans through the Declaration of Independence to the work of Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.

Of course, simply because the founding fathers made these claims doesn't mean they were correct. It could also be that they were right in their time but their arguments no longer apply in our time; that religious faith was a positive force at the founding but has become less of one today.

Let's see if their arguments hold up in today's world, then. The strongest case for religion in public life comes from the moral instruction needed in guiding our politics—religion helps ground politics in morality. Without this grounding, it's more difficult to appeal to fixed moral points. It has never been clear to me, for example, how one can make a persuasive case for justice and the moral good—even for the proposition that all men are created equal—without an appeal to God and transcendent truth, since it's not clear what the grounding for truth would otherwise be.

My point isn't that atheists can't be good people; clearly they can be, and many prove that every day. Many, in fact, live lives of greater moral integrity than people of faith. I'm making a rather different point, which is that it's difficult for them to offer a compelling case for inherent human dignity and worth. What is their argument against capriciousness and injustice, tyranny, and the will to power, absent a Creator?

I have posed to atheist friends of mine—including the late Christopher Hitchens, who authored one of the most popular caustic attacks on God, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*—several interlocking questions. How does one create a system of justice and make the case against, say, slavery, if (Page 68) you begin with three propositions: one, the universe is created by chance; two, it will end in nothing; and three, there is no external source of authority to which to resort?

Christopher was a polemicist and a man of dazzling intelligence, and I found him to be more charming and less abrasive in person than in print. (One of the more enjoyable conversations we had was about faith, C.S. Lewis, and the British journalist and later convert to Christianity, Malcolm Muggeridge.)

Christopher would typically respond to questions I and others posed to him by challenging us to name one ethical statement made, or one ethical action preformed, by a believer that could not have been uttered or done by a nonbeliever. He would then ask us to consider all of the wicked statements made and evil actions performed by people precisely because of religious faith.

Of course, it's perfectly legitimate to point out that religion can be corrupted and has been used for awful ends. And I have readily conceded that nonbelievers can act ethically and do so all the time. But that still doesn't explain what a nontheistic moral code would be grounded in.

Let me press the point further: if you were a materialist or a relativist, why would you have any confidence that your beliefs were rooted in anything permanent or that they applied to you and to others? How would you respond to Nietzschean who said, "Your belief is fine for you, but is simply not binding to me. God is dead—and I choose to follow my Will to Power. You may not agree, but there is no philosophical or moral ground on which you can make your stand."

How do you get from the "is" to the "ought"? How do you avoid the trap laid out by Ivan Karamazov: If God does not exist, "everything is permitted"? ([Page 69](#))

Even supposing human instincts have moral instincts and a moral sense based on human evolution and biology, why would you choose to follow them? We have lots of instincts—some noble and some base. Why would you choose the more noble ones, like cooperation and sympathy, tolerance and fair play, instead of, say, using power against those you have authority over? Why not rig the game to advance your own self-interests? Why not cheat on your wife if you derive pleasure from it? "When all that says 'it is good' has been debunked," C.S. Lewis said, "what says 'I want' remains."

Steve Hayner, the former president of Columbia Theological Seminary and a spiritual mentor of mine who passed away in 2015, told me something that adds an important layer to this discussion. We believe we have worth because we are created in God's image, he said. But even more basic is the declaration that we have value simply because God values us.

Gold is valuable because someone values it, not because there is something about gold that has intrinsic worth. Sure, gold is aesthetically beautiful and has particular qualities that set it apart (it is highly conductive, for example, and noncorroding). But gold would not be valuable if it were not thought to be so by someone. In this case, value is attributed to gold by us and would lose its value if we collectively decided it no longer had value. But human beings are of worth because we are valued by God. Indeed, Christians believe God demonstrates the value of humanity by his continuing involvement with us.

It is God's *attributive* quality of worth that underlies Christian and Jewish anthropology. Humanly derived values create comparative worth, which opens the door to an economic or utilitarian assessment of the value of an individual.

Divinely attributed (*Page 70*) values convey intrinsic worth. According to Hayner, our worth was not derived from culture or circumstances. Here, worth comes from understanding all people as precious in God's sight.

Antitheists disagree that we have worth because human beings are precious in God's sight. They treat religious beliefs as mere superstition, as something less, while asserting that knowledge alone contributes to political philosophy and our understanding of human nature. But it is one thing to argue that God doesn't exist; it is quite another to insist that faith can offer nothing of use, that it "poisons everything," to use a Hitchens phrase—that it can't offer insights into the human condition. Augustine and Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards and Reinhold Niebuhr, Maimonides and Rabbi Joshua Heschel, Mahatma Gandhi and Avicenna, and countless others, prove otherwise. (To be fair, I have friends who are atheists who don't accept supernaturalism as a warrant for moral beliefs but still value the moral insights and arguments of religious thinkers who make what they deem to be rational claims. As one of them put it to me, "We wouldn't dream of tossing Jesus or Augustine in the trash.")

In sum, then: without an appeal to transcendent truth and authority, there is nothing one ultimately can anchor morality in; and if politics is stripped of morality, it's merely a power game. Politics, without fixed moral points, easily devolves into unchecked power, from which abuses result. And theology, once considered the queen of the disciplines, can deepen our understanding of public life and the common good. Those who criticize religion as an inherently baleful influence on politics would do well to understand as Nietzsche did, just how ugly and terrifying a world without moral absolutes would be.

It needs to be said that many thinkers have wrestled conscientiously (*Page 71*) and intelligently with how to find moral grounding without God, arguing that our knowledge of right and wrong is innate in us. "Religion gets its morality from humans," according to Hitchens. "We know that we can't get along if we permit perjury, theft, murder, rape. All societies at all times, well before the advent of monotheism, certainly, have forbidden it."

I don't find their efforts ultimately persuasive, but this book is not the place to dive deeper into these ageless disputes. Suffice to say that, for the faithful explicitly and even for many secular people implicitly, religion provides an indispensable moral true north, and it would not be reasonable to expect all these Americans to leave their compasses home.

As for those of the Christian faith who insist that their theology argues against political involvement—who argue for segregating the "sacred" from the "secular" and that Christians should be, in the words of the historian of religion

Darryl Hart, “occupied with a world to come rather than the passing and temporal affairs of the world”—I would respectfully suggest they are distorting things to a rather serious degree.

Citizenship is an important Christian concept. For those of the Christian faith, the ultimate allegiance is to the City of God, to borrow a phrase from Saint Augustine. “Our citizenship is in heaven,” the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. “And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” But as the theologian Timothy Keller pointed out to me, in the book of Acts Paul regularly refers to and relies on his Roman citizenship, which came with both rights and duties. (At the time Roman citizenship was restricted and taken quite seriously, a “coveted treasure” in the words of the New Testament scholar Sean A. Adams.) “That is something like what we see in Jer-([Page 72](#))emiah 29, where the Jews who were ultimately citizens of Jerusalem were called to be excellent citizens of Babylon,” according to Keller. “It is clear as can be that, while our ultimate allegiance is to the City Above, that should make us the very best citizens of our earthly cities.”

Moreover, the Christian faith, as I understand it, teaches that theological truths apply to all of God’s creation; that Christianity was never meant to be privatized; and that the biblical narrative is of God’s active involvement in human affairs. Whatever one thinks about the Christian story, it does not portray a God who is distant, removed, and remote, indifferent to and disengaged from our lives or the life of the world. God clearly wanted to instruct us about how we should live in this life by participating in the human drama, not just as the author of it, but as an actor in the drama, too.

## **FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD**

The God of Judaism and Christianity requires us to care for justice, and politics is a realm where that plays out. If Christians care about justice, then, they need to be involved with politics.

The biblical prophet Jeremiah tells us to seek the welfare of the city to which we have been exiled and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its prosperity we shall prosper. Withdrawing from an arena where human rights are contested—where the welfare of the city is decided—isn’t a serious option. I would say the formulation of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein applies to the whole of scripture: “The Torah is neither world-accepting nor world-rejecting. It is world-redeeming.” The Jewish term *tikkun olam* means “to repair the world.” ([Page 73](#))

Christians in despair over the state of the world often miss the full picture. There is in fact much in America that is going right on a daily basis, in ways so common as to be forgotten. We take for granted, far more than we should, that by many measures we are living in the most privileged nation on earth during the best time to be alive in history. And contrary to the impression left by some on the religious Right, the United States in the twenty-first century is not the Roman Empire under Nero, when according to the Roman historian Tacitus, “Nero set up as the culprits and punished with utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations who are commonly called Christians . . . Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified.” Yes, Christians are losing some cultural debates, but it is silly to describe our plight as if we were being fed to the dogs.

As for those who counsel retreating from politics: those who devalue the importance of politics tend to be those who live in luxury and safety, where systemic injustice is a distant reality, unseen and unfelt by those who live in comfortable neighborhoods. “It is hard for those who live near a Police Station / To believe in the triumph of violence,” T.S. Elliot wrote in his poem, “Choruses from ‘The Rock.’”

The temptation to retreat from politics goes aground when it hits this historical truth: America and the world have been made tangibly better and more just because Americans of faith took their beliefs into politics.

Let’s first note the countless acts of kindness and charity by individuals motivated by faith who have helped the homeless, drug and alcohol addicts, single mothers and children of prisoners, the [\(Page 74\)](#) elderly and infirm, victims of natural disaster, the poor and hungry, refugees and those trapped in slavery and sex trafficking around the world, and more. According to the Pew Research Center, “people who are highly religious are more engaged with their extended families, more likely to volunteer, more involved in their communities and generally happier with the way things are going in their lives.” Other studies show that the religious among us are more likely to give to charities than those who do not identify with a faith tradition.

But I have in mind as well great acts of compassion by government. For example, the global AIDS and malaria initiative is President George W. Bush’s greatest legacy; more than 13 million people are on lifesaving antiretroviral treatment as a consequence. This was a policy that came about in response to human sympathies that were shaped in large part by the faith of Mr. Bush; some of his key advisors, including Michael Gerson, who was a senior policy advisor

and chief speechwriter to President Bush and a committed evangelical Christian; and the rock star Bono, who worked with the president to combat AIDS. (“I’ve become very fond of him,” Bono said of Bush. “Underneath his armor, there’s passion, compassion. He has it.”)

I have in mind, too, movements for justice, including the abolitionist, labor, and pro-life movements, as well as the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King Jr. was not just a civil rights activist; he was a reverend—a pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, as well as graduate of Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, where he received his PhD in systematic theology. Dr. King was also author of one of the [\(Page 75\)](#) landmark documents in American history, Letter from Birmingham Jail.

Written in 1963, it was addressed to white clergymen from Birmingham who believed King’s efforts to overthrow segregation were “untimely.” They counseled patience. They wanted the issue to be waged in the courtrooms rather than on the streets. These ministers were more concerned about civil rights protestors than the injustice the protestors were seeking to rectify.

In his nearly six-thousand-word point-by-point rebuttal, King argued that one has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws—but conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. “Now, what is the difference between the two?” King asked. “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” To which he answered thus:

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in the eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.

The dignity and worth of the human personality, King believed—as did Lincoln a century before him, and the American founders a century before *him*—were God given. (John F. Kennedy, one of the most revered figures among liberals and Democrats, declared [\(Page 76\)](#) in his inaugural address that “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”)

It was religious faith that gave the civil rights movement its moral force. And it is religious faith that at its best provides ideals that transcend different cultures and allows us to stand in judgement of all cultures, including our own. Any movement for social justice depends on a set of values to define it.

It should be pointed out that King's letter was written by a Christian who believed in justice, but it was sent to Christians who were arguing that we *delay* justice. Which again underscores the point that religion can sometimes be a force for social good, and sometimes not. It depends on the wisdom, integrity, and courage of those who interpret and act on the scriptures. The devil can quote scripture for his own purposes, as Shakespeare put it; and all of us can cherry-pick from history to make very nearly whatever point we want. A fair reading of history is that Christians have opposed and been implicated in countless social evils. The record has always been mixed and remains so to this very day. But one must also admit that in many instances moral progress in our history was begun by courageous religious people doing what they thought God was calling them to do.

## **WHAT WENT WRONG?**

As someone who has spent much of his life sympathetic to the positive role faith can play in political life, I sometimes feel the Trump presidency has very nearly been an outright repudiation of my views: not about whether politics can benefit from the influence of Christian religion, which I believe, but whether in reality it usually does; whether in the practical outworking of things, both politics ([Page 77](#)) and Christians bearing witness are now made worse by people of faith actively involving themselves in politics.

I've harbored these concerns on and off for the last several decades. I have long been troubled by what I perceived as the subordination of Christianity to partisan ideology—the ease with which people took something sacred and turned it into a blunt political weapon. I saw this happen time and again through the years, always hoping that these temptations and abuses would recede and give way to a movement dedicated to justice and human dignity, one that stood in judgment of all political parties and ideologies and that was beholding to none. But Jerry Falwell Sr. gave way to Jerry Falwell Jr., Billy Graham gave way to Franklin Graham, and things now are worse, not better. The Trump era has utterly discredited significant parts of the American evangelical movement.

Most people miss what was most troubling about the 2016 election cycle. It is not merely the fact that Trump won four-fifths of white evangelicals in the

2016 election against candidate Hillary Clinton, who was advocating policies they considered inimical to their beliefs. What is much worse and more troubling is that so many of them supported Mr. Trump in the *Republican* primaries, when there were more than a dozen candidates who were, by any reasonable standard that ought to matter to evangelicals, light-years better than Trump. I would go so far as to say it's very nearly impossible to defend even a single evangelical vote for Trump in the Republican primary, at least if evangelicals genuinely cared for the values the purport to represent.

Yet Trump not only did well with evangelicals, he won a plurality of evangelical votes in key early contests in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada. He garnered significant support on ([Page 78](#)) "Super Tuesday." And by April 2016 he was the preferred candidate of more than a third of weekly churchgoers. Trump could not have won the GOP nomination without the Christian vote.

A conservative friend who is generally very supportive of Christianity told me that the real danger for evangelical Christianity is that "it becomes a vehicle for resentments of middle-class white America," adding that "the church may become a voice for the resentments of the strong in the country when in fact it should be focused on the weak."

As for evangelical leaders, what we saw from most was not pained, reluctant, qualified expressions of support for Trump—support based only on the fact that his opponent in the 2016 election was a committed liberal, Hillary Clinton. I would disagree with that stance even as I could acknowledge it's a defensible one.

What we have instead—from prominent evangelical figures like Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham, James Dobson, Tony Perkins, Eric Metaxas, Robert Jeffress, the former minister Mike Huckabee, and others—are defenses of Trump that range from the rhapsodic to ridiculous. One illustration: Jerry Falwell Jr., president of one of the largest evangelical colleges in the world, said that in Trump, evangelicals had found their "dream president." He insists that Trump is a Churchillian figure, "one of the greatest visionaries of our time" who "lives a life of loving and helping others as Jesus taught in the New Testament." Falwell Jr. added that Donald Trump has "single-handedly changed the definition of what is 'presidential' from phony, failed & rehearsed to authentic, successful, & down to earth."

We all know—and presumably in their quiet and more reflective moments *they* all know—that if a liberal Democratic president or candidate had acted in the ways Donald Trump has in his per-([Page 79](#))sonal life, many of these evangelical leaders would be savaging that person based on the conviction that

personal morality in political leaders matters. That is, after all, precisely what they did during the presidency of Bill Clinton.

Here is Gary Bauer, today a vocal Trump supporter but in 1998 the head of the Family Research Council: “The seamy facts under public discussion are shameful enough. But fascination with this story should not be allowed to obscure the deeper lesson these incidents impart. That lesson is this: Character counts—in a people, in the institutions of our society, and in our national leadership.” In the same year Franklin Graham wrote that Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinski should not just concern his family but the “rest of the world,” adding, “If he will lie to or mislead his wife and daughter, those with whom he is most intimate, what will prevent him from doing the same to the American public?”

Yet today, with Trump as president—when the excuse that failure to support Trump would lead to a Hillary Clinton presidency is long gone—many evangelical leaders dismiss these concerns almost entirely, some evoking the bible as their *defense* for Trump’s outrageous conduct. They are, in fact, using many of the same arguments by Clinton’s defenders in the 1990s to respond to criticisms by the religious Right.

A set of data points illustrates the double standard we’re seeing. In October 2016—several weeks after the release of the notorious *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump bragged about his affairs and declared that when you’re a star, “You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything”—more than seven in ten (72 percent) white evangelical Protestants said an elected official can behave ethically even if they have committed transgressions (*Page 80*) in their personal life. Five years earlier, when Barak Obama was president, only 30 percent of white evangelical Protestants said the same. No group shifted their position more dramatically than white evangelical Protestants.

But it’s not only Mr. Trump’s sexual transgressions that are relevant here; it’s the whole package deal. Mr. Trump lies pathologically. He exhibits crude and cruel behavior, relishes humiliating those over whom he has power, and dehumanizes his political opponents, women, and the weak. He is indifferent to objective truth, trades in conspiracy theories, and exploits the darker impulses of the public. His style of politics is characterized by stoking anger and grievances rather than demonstrating empathy and justice. In sum, Mr. Trump embodies a Nietzschean morality rather than a Christian one. It is a repudiation of Christian concern for the poor and the weak, instead offering disdain for the powerless. Donald Trump’s perspective is might makes right.

To be clear, Trump's most visible and vocal Christian supporters aren't responsible for the character flaws and ethical failures of the president. But by their refusal to confront those flaws and failures, they are complicit in the debasement of American culture and politics. Even more personally painful to me, they are presenting a warped and disfigured view of Christianity to the world. They are effectively blessing a leader who has acted in ways that are fundamentally incompatible with a Christian ethic.

A friend of mine who is an atheist told me that what is unfolding is "consistent with what sociobiology theorizes about religion: its evolutionary purpose is to foster in-group solidarity. Principles serve rather than rule that mission." This certainly isn't my view of faith, but in the current circumstances—given what is playing out in public—this is not an unreasonable conclusion for him to *(Page 81)* draw. And he is not alone. This kind of perception is multiplying. The evangelicals I have mentioned are doing more to damage the Christian witness than the so-called New Atheist ever could.

It is hardly a surprise that in 2018 confidence in the church or organized religion dropped from the previous year, from 41 percent to 38 percent. According to Gallop, "This is another all-time low for an institution whose highly positive image has been shrinking since its peak of 68% 'great deal/quite a lot' confidence rating in 1975. The church had been the top rated institution in the 1973-1985 surveys."

## **FEAR AMONG THE FAITHFUL**

So how did we get to this present place?

How on earth did we end up in a situation where, in the words of Redeemer Presbyterian Church's Tim Keller, one of the most trusted evangelicals in the world, "'evangelical' used to denote people who claimed the high moral ground; now, in popular usage, the word is nearly synonymous with 'hypocrite'"?

It's a long and complicated story. Part of the answer is undoubtedly that some evangelicals are giving in to the ancient temptation of being too close to political power, choosing to be court pastors to win favor of the king. They are thrilled to be taken seriously, thrilled to be invited to the White House, thrilled to be seen as having influence in the highest ranks of political power.

That is understandable; motivations are always mixed and never entirely pure, and pride often rears its ugly head in situations like this. Rather than acknowledge this, however, what we're often getting is a spiritual show, a

Christian Potemkin village, with (Page 82) people self-sacralizing their ambitions. (I know one person, a conservative commentator, who has justified his reluctance to publicly criticize the President Trump because, he told me, he believes doing so will destroy his ability to witness to him.)

A more benign interpretation, as I understand the position of certain Christian leaders, is that the access to power and influence has positive policy ramifications. I've stayed up until 3:00 a.m. talking to close friends—people of integrity with good hearts—who are aggrieved by my public criticisms of President Trump. In their defense of Trump's evangelical supporters they argue that is essential to influence the administration on issues that matter politically to conservative Christians. (They have in mind court appointments and pro-life policies, in particular.)

Their position has a certain logic to it, but it comes with a price. Because of Trump's narcissism, anything less than a full-throated public defense of him is viewed as disloyal. So to maintain their influence and access, many evangelical leaders have offered up outlandish rationalizations for the president. Faith becomes something to be used instrumentally, something to be publicly compromised in order to have a seat at the table of the politically powerful. And it raises the question, where do evangelicals draw the line? At what point do they say that access to power isn't worth debasing themselves and their faith? The answer with Trump—at least so far, at least for many of the most politically prominent evangelicals—is never.

“Once you have made the world an end and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing,” C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior devil offers advice to a junior devil, “Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, move-(Page 83)ments, causes and crusades matter more to him than prayer and sacraments and charity, he is ours.”

Another explanation for what is unfolding within American Christianity is political tribalism, which is hardly a new phenomenon but is more acute than in the past. There is intense partisan loyalty at play—a feeling of belonging and community, a sense of shared purposes and shared adversaries, an eagerness to have political views reaffirmed and celebrated, and the belief that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The result is that faith is subordinated to partisanship rather than partisanship being diluted by faith. When you become part of a team, including a political team, it can blind you to alternative perspectives and facts. In many cases political affiliations, not theological truths, are given priority. Politics is the

lens through which reality is interpreted, the mold in which attitudes and sensibilities are formed.

“Political homogeneity in the evangelical world is unhelpful to America,” James Forsyth, a close friend who was born in Scotland and is now the senior pastor of the church my family and I attend in McLean, Virginia, said to me. Many evangelicals also feel increasingly powerless, beaten down, aggrieved, and under attack—and in some cases, they are. The elite culture is hostile to some traditional Christian beliefs.

The massive cultural shifts we have seen, especially in the realm of human sexuality, have left them with a sense that they’ve gone from being a “Moral Majority” to a persecuted minority. A sense of *ressentiment* [French: resentment], and a “narrative of injury,” is leading some evangelicals to look for scapegoats to explain their growing impotence. People filled with anger and grievances are easily exploited. “Christians and people on the right start by believing ([Page 84](#)) they are fighting satanic forces,” a person who is generally quite sympathetic to Christians told me, “and in the process become nihilists.” It is as if there’s a deep emotional need for a dark narrative.

Part of the explanation has to do with worry bordering on panic, including fear of lost status and influence. “We used to be the home team,” one theologian told me. “Now we’re the away team.”

The fear is that the America many white evangelicals knew and cherished is fading away; that the United States is in a moral freefall; that our problems are overwhelming and almost beyond our capacity to fix them. “We are on the verge of losing America” is a common refrain one hears. One pastor told me that Christians he interacts with “speak about losing their country with an intensity as if they are losing their God.”

What Americans therefore need, many evangelicals believe, is an alpha male, a strongman, a person who will hit back against his critics (and their critics) ten times harder than they were hit. The Baptist pastor of a Dallas-based megachurch, Robert Jeffress, says Trump’s tone doesn’t bother him because “I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect this nation.” Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr., in a tweet, declared this: “Conservatives & Christians need to stop electing ‘nice guys.’ They might make great Christian leaders but the US needs street fighters like @realDonaldTrump at every level of government b/c the liberal fascists Dems are playing for keeps & many [Republican] leaders are a bunch of wimps!” And according to Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, evangelicals “were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad there’s somebody

(Page 85) on the playground that is willing to punch the bully.” That “street fighter,” that “meanest, toughest SOB,” that “somebody” is Donald J. Trump.

Although bully worship, as Orwell called it, is never justified, one must confess that there is a nub of a fair challenge in this claim. Religious conservatives may understandably ask a version of this question: “In a country where not all play by Marquess of Queensbury rules, where the stakes of politics are literally life and death—with hundreds of thousand of babies aborted each year—and where Christianity and conservative values face real perils, how can we push back if we don’t embrace some pretty tough hombres?”

There is, however, a better way.

## **THE RIGHT WAY OUT AND THE RIGHT WAY UP**

Having worked in politics my entire adult life, including on presidential campaigns and in the White House, I understand that governing involves complicated choices, transactional dealings, and prudential judgments. No one ever gets things exactly right, and all who choose to serve deserve our prayers for wisdom. Politics is certainly not a place for the pursuit of utopia and moral perfection; rather, at its best, it is about achieving the best approximation of the public good, about protecting human dignity and advancing, even imperfectly, a more just social order.

But with political involvement come temptations and traps, and it is the responsibility of Christians to act in ways that maintain the integrity of their public witness and improve our politics. The fact that this isn’t happening is what makes this moment so troubling. (Page 86)

I am not a prophet, nor am I a theologian or church leader. Still, based on my experience and based on my extensive conversations with such leaders and with others dedicated to loving out their faith with integrity in the political sphere, I would point to four aspirations Christians should strive for if they wish to redeem this moment:

1. That Christians begin with Jesus, tying their efforts to what he actually taught and modeled
2. That Christians, especially evangelicals, articulate a coherent vision of politics that is informed by their moral vision of justice and the common good

3. That Christians model and maintain a deep attitudinal shift away from a spirit of anger toward understanding, from revenge toward reconciliation, from grievance toward gratitude, and from fear toward trust and love
4. That Christians treat all types of people as the “neighbors” they are meant to love

### *1. Begin with Jesus*

Christians need to reacquaint themselves with the Jesus of the New Testament, not the Jesus of the right-wing media complex. The real Jesus demonstrated a profound mistrust of political power, declined Satan’s offer of the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and did not encourage his disciples to become involved in political movements of any kind.

The most meaningful emblem of Christianity is not the sword but the cross, which is the antithesis of worldly power. Unlike Muhammad, Jesus made it clear time and time again that his kingdom ([Page 87](#)) is not of the world. And the New Testament, which offers detailed thoughts on all sorts of matters—from the qualifications for being an elder to parenting advice to how women should adorn themselves—does not provide anything like a governing blueprint.

The early church did not hand out voter guides. What it *did* do, according to the sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, is create “communal compassion” and social networks; care for the sick, widows, and orphans; welcome strangers and care for outsiders; respect women; and connect to non-Christians. That is how a tiny and obscure messianic movement in the second and third centuries became the dominant faith of Western civilization. That is how it transformed the ancient world and the course of human history.

To repeat: this does not mean that Christians, Christian institutions, and churches should never under any circumstances be involved in politics since politics has profound human consequences. What it *does* mean is that Christians need to take on a much different posture than many of them have, to move away from hyperpartisanship toward a more detached and prophetic role, and to take more seriously than many do the idea of dual citizenship—the belief that we are citizens of the City of Man but that our deepest loyalties are to the City of God. This ought to create some safe distance from the principalities and powers of this world.

A proper political theology would prevent Christians, Christian institutions, and churches from becoming pawns in political power games. That

may sound so obvious as to be banal, but many evangelical Christians in particular—not all, but many—have been as susceptible to manipulation as any group involved in politics that I’ve seen. *(Page 88)*

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

## ***2. Articulate a Coherent Vision***

Evangelicals need to develop a theory of political and social engagement that is far more comprehensive and careful, mature and informed, textured and sophisticated. Too often our political aspirations have been defined by the moment or by others and so seem to change and shift according to who is pulling the strings.

In this respect, evangelicals and Protestants have much to learn from Catholicism, which has laid out and built on principles of social teaching over many centuries, often through encyclicals like Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (Of the New Things), which addressed the conditions of the working class, and John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year), which expounded on issues of economic and social justice at the time of collapse of Soviet Communism and reflected on the political, economic, and moral components of a free society.

The cornerstones of Catholic social thought are human dignity; subsidiarity, which holds that nothing should be done by larger and more complex institutions that can be done by smaller and simpler ones; and solidarity, meaning the social obligations we have to one another, with a special concern for the poor and most vulnerable members of the human community. *(Page 89)* (Many of us who are non-Catholic but have had great respect for the teachings of the Catholic Church have been shaken to our core by the sickening and shameful sexual abuse scandals, by the Church’s efforts at cover-ups, and by the failure to prevent further abuse.)

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

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

### ***3. Model a Deep Attitudinal Shift, Biased Toward Unity***

A third thing that needs to happen is in some senses the most fundamental, which is a deep attitudinal shift among the many politically active Christians—to move away from a spirit of anger toward understanding, from revenge toward reconciliation, from grievance toward gratitude, and from fear toward trust. Fear is prevalent, but for Christians, love casts our fear.

Ken Stern is a fair-minded liberal who spent a year with people on the right to better understand their worldview. (His book, *(Page 90) Republican Like Me: How I Left the Liberal Bubble and Learned to Love the Right*, documents his journey.) Stern visited evangelicals in a variety of settings and was impressed by the generosity he encountered. A pastor friend and I met him for lunch. Here is the question Stern posed to us: Why, since so many evangelicals live lives devoted to helping others, does that not translate into a political agenda that reflects that fact? How is it that the “culture war” issues succeed in becoming the public face of Christianity, while the many acts of kindness and charity, and the spirit informing those things, are kept under a bushel, largely out of public view? Why consistently show you worst side rather than you most winsome one?

We wondered the same thing.

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

In his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey tells of how prior to writing his book he began asking a question of strangers when striking up a conversation. “When I say the words ‘evangelical Christian’ what comes to mind?” Yancey wrote that he mostly heard *political* descriptions—and not once did he hear a description redolent of grace.

Yancey adds this:

Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people. I think back to who I was—resentful, wound tight with anger, a single hardened link in a long chain of un-grace learned from family and church. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace. I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness or goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. I yearn for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace.

It's true enough that a common error within Christianity is to use grace as a way to elide wrongdoing, and that those who are willing to stand up for biblical morality can easily (and unfairly) be caricatured as ungracious. But Yancy's insights are worth considering in the context of Christians and their role in and impact on public matters. He's a faithful follower of Jesus who sees things from a perspective that is not only biblically grounded but desperately needed because it is in such short supply.

#### **4. BECOME LOVING NEIGHBORS**

Which leads me to the fourth thing Christians can do to strengthen our public witness and the state of our politics: internalize and act on the lessons of the ancient parable. The one I have in mind is Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, and it speaks to this moment in a powerful way.

The context of the story is that Jesus, who declared that we should love our neighbor, is asked, "Who is this, our neighbor?" The parable—found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke—is Jesus's response.

In the story, a Samaritan comes across a Jew who has been beaten, robbed, and left dying on the side of a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. After a priest and Levite both ignore the wounded man, the Samaritan rescues him and at his own expense nurses him back to health. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says. (*Page 92*)

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

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

All of this has obvious lessons for the here and now. Our politics is polarized and tribalized. Many Americans view “the other” with suspicion and contempt. For some, these are refugees, Muslims, and Mexicans; for others, it’s rural southerners, gun owners, and religious fundamentalists. That combination of suspicion and contempt is eating away at our sense of national unity and runs counter to what Jesus taught.

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

The way to create a bond between people isn’t sitting across a table from each other talking about bonding; it’s to put them in situations ([Page 93](#)) where they’re working shoulder-to-shoulder in pursuit of a common goal, especially a humanitarian one.

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

## **REDEMPTION AND RECONCILIATION**

Five years ago, my friend Steve Hayner mentioned to me that he was going through the Gospel of Luke and was struck again by the grace and embrace that Jesus extended to those whom the religious elite had every reason (they thought) to kick to the curb. People on the low rungs of life, including those with frailties and flaws, flocked to Jesus, not because he

preached moral rectitude but because he was willing to love them, to listen to them, and to welcome them.

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

“I doubt whether God will have much to say about our political convictions in the end,” Steve said to me, “but I’m quite sure that he will have something to say about how we loved the least, the marginalized, the outcasts, the lonely, the abused—even when some think that they have it all. Political convictions that ([Page 94](#)) lead toward redemption and reconciliation are most likely headed in the right direction.”

This isn’t a prescription for a particular kind of political involvement. It’s certainly not a road map on how to deal with complicated public issues. It is, however, a reflection on *how* Christians should engage the world, including the political world. Then, there is the wisdom and richness in a few words central to the Christian message: *redemption* and *reconciliation*.

The successful political-social movement I have in mind will require Christians to make a compelling case for social order and moral excellence done with generosity of spirit, while offering a healing touch, especially to those who are suffering and living in the shadows of society.

It will require Christians to be less fearful and more hopeful, less anxious and more confident that God is sovereign and all powerful, and that his purposes don’t ultimately rest on their efforts. Christians engaged in public life should model calm trust rather than panic and vitriol born of anxiety. We are called to be faithful, not successful; to act with integrity, not to become just another special interest group whose worth is measured by its influence on the politically powerful.

“All admirable,” some of my Christian conservative friends may say, “but just words. Don’t you know we’re under siege by the radical Left and the hostile secular culture? Don’t you realize that if we do not push back, now and hard, we may lose the very liberty to practice and embody the values you celebrate? What you say is fine for ordinary times, but these are desperate times that require desperate measures—such as Donald Trump.”

I do hear, but I don’t agree. First, because my friends’ fears are simply not justified by the facts. Second, because even if the times ([Page](#)

95] were desperate, responding with fear and anger in ways that betray our own teaching will cloud our vision and sabotage our battle. Embracing Trump, whose defining characteristics include dishonesty and exploitation, does not help us. Third, because by letting fear rule, we open ourselves to far too easy manipulation by fearmongers and demagogues, who are expert at scaring up our money and votes for their own profit and power. And fourth, because being political outsiders or even a cultural minority is not something to fear in the first place. Historically, Christianity has done its best work and exerted its greatest influence not from a position of political dominance but while being faithful—even from a position of political weakness. For all those reasons, fear, as a basis for Christian politics, is our enemy, not our friend. It is not our weapon; rather it controls us and eventually can consume us.

“We need a gospel culture as opposed to a political culture,” James Forsyth told me. “Jesus challenges all our categories—political, theological, ethnic, racial, cultural.” He added, “What we need is a humble remapping of cultural engagement.”

How will that occur? Admonitions offered in good faith may help here and there. In the end, though, it will require a transformation of individual hearts, a reordering of priorities. It will require from people of faith more modesty and less rigid, off-putting certainty. It will require seeing the virtues in our opponents and the shortcomings in our allies and ourselves. And it will require people of faith to see the world through gentler eyes. That isn’t likely to happen unless some inner transformation happens. It has occurred before. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good (Page 96) and acceptable and perfect,” the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans.

History has shown that politics can be a more noble enterprise when it is twinned with faith, but only faith properly understood and properly executed. It turns out that this is a good deal easier to get wrong and a good deal harder to get right than I once thought.

I’m not willing to give up on this linkage, this alliance, at least not yet. But to my co-religionists I would say this: we need to do it right and we need to do it better, for the sake of American politics, for the sake of a just moral order, and for the sake of our Christian witness to an increasingly skeptical and jaded world. I may not be certain how we can accomplish what many of us aspire to, but I am confident I know how God and the

world will judge whether we are doing it in a way that deserves the label  
“Christian.”