

Visions for Christian Public Life

Exploring Christian Engagement
in Contemporary American
Politics and Society



*A Compilation of Essays Presented at the
Initiative on Faith & Public Life's 2020 Faculty Retreat*

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Introduction

What is the goal of Christian public life? How should Christians engage in societies, political systems, and cultures that are, in some cases, antagonistic to the core principles of our faith? Do we set ourselves apart? Do we assimilate? Do we actively engage and seek to transform?

These questions are perennial because Christianity is not merely a private affair. It permeates the entire life of the individual believer (including that person's day-to-day life in secular society), and it is inherently evangelistic: Jesus told His followers to "go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation."¹ In other words, to be a follower of Christ is to order one's *entire* life toward His example and teachings and *necessarily* share this good news with others.

This may seem relatively straightforward in principle, but it never has been in practice. In the 5th century, St. Augustine famously wrestled with these questions in his *City of God*. In his conception, true Christians are primarily (and ultimately) citizens of the City of God, or the Heavenly City. However, they also inhabit the City of Man, or the Earthly City, "on pilgrimage" in a temporal reality that is under "the condition of mortality."² The values of temporal society are often at odds with the values of the Kingdom of God, and yet, we are nonetheless sort of dual citizens during this life. Like the prophet Jeremiah extolled, we therefore have a responsibility to "seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."³

But what does that look like in each era? How do we avoid being formed by the values of the City of Man while still engaging in it and seeking its good?

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These questions have particular relevance in the United States in 2019. An American culture that has historically been friendly to—and even characterized by—Judeo-Christian values is becoming increasingly secular. Meanwhile, in the Donald Trump era, Christians are wrestling in new ways with their relationship with temporal politics. What is the worth of political victories in the Earthly City, and what are we willing to sacrifice for them?

The newfound relevance of these questions is, in part, why we decided it was time to rename our program the Initiative on Faith & Public Life. Of course, exploring the compatibility of our faith with certain economic and political systems remains an important task—and one that our program will continue to facilitate. But, those are somewhat secondary questions to this core one: How do people of sincere faith engage in public life?

Our initiative aims to provide forums for exploring this complex question (and related questions). This compilation of essays, written by members of our faculty network, is one such forum. We hope these essays help guide and spur on your own thinking on this important topic.

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Notes

1. Mark 16:15 (English Standard Version).
2. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), Book 19, Chapter 17.
3. Jeremiah 29:7 (English Standard Version).

Toward a Better Christian Political Engagement: Acknowledging Challenges, Recognizing Opportunities

Daniel Bennett

Much has been written about the “81 percent,” the approximate proportion of white evangelical Christians who voted for Donald Trump for president in 2016. How, some have asked, could so many vote for a man so unlike them in their purported values and character? It is not an unreasonable question. For decades conservative Christian leaders spoke of the need for moral character among public officials. “Character matters,” said the Christian Coalition’s Ralph Reed during the Bill Clinton impeachment saga. “We care about the conduct of our leaders, and we will not rest until we have leaders of good moral character.”¹ James Dobson echoed these thoughts in 1998 in a newsletter to his Focus on the Family audience: “As it turns out, character does matter. You can’t run a family, let alone a country, without it. How foolish to believe that a person who lacks honesty and moral integrity is qualified to lead a nation and the world!”² And in a 2011 survey, just 30 percent of white evangelicals believed you could separate an elected official’s public activities and private morality.³

A shift in this perspective coincided with Trump, a thrice-married admitted philanderer uncomfortable with the Christian faith—when asked in 2015 if he had ever asked God for forgiveness, Trump responded, “I am not sure I have”⁴—securing the Republican nomination for president. In an interview on NPR in June 2016, Reed expressed his confidence in Trump’s moral character, citing Trump’s family as evidence: “I know his children.

And you don't raise children who are this phenomenal if you're a person of bad moral character."⁵ Likewise, in his endorsement of Trump in *Time* magazine, Dobson said, "I am supporting Mr. Trump primarily because I believe he is the most capable candidate to lead the United States of America in this complicated hour."⁶ And by October 2016, the percentage of white evangelicals believing you could separate private morality from public service was 72 percent, an increase of 42 points from five years earlier.⁷

The response to white evangelicals' support for Trump has been predictable and widespread. Some critics have come from inside this community, suggesting that offering such unwavering support for Trump will harm the Christian message in the future. Russell Moore of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) was critical of his fellow conservative Christians, saying, "The question is whether evangelicals will be on the right side of Jesus. That will mean standing up for the church's future leaders, and for our mission, especially when they are politically powerless."⁸ Likewise, conservative author David French tied support for Trump to a decay in American culture: "Our nation can survive lost elections, but over the long term it cannot survive a decayed culture. And by God I won't vote for a man who takes a wrecking ball to the core values I hold dear."⁹ While conservative Christians overwhelmingly supported Trump in 2016, his critics in the movement have been just as vocal.

Not surprisingly, progressive Christians have also been vocal in their critiques of their conservative brethren's approach to politics. Perhaps nobody has been more confident critiquing conservative Christians than Pete Buttigieg, the Episcopalian mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and current Democratic candidate for president. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Buttigieg suggested that Christians supporting Trump taint the faith.

If people who are avowedly Christian can get themselves into bed with a president like this, it raises the question of what ethical content at all Christianity even has. And it's not so much Trump

himself. I think there's an extent to which he's always winking when he pretends to have any religious conviction whatsoever, and the only question is who's in on the joke. But it's certainly an issue when you think about the Mike Pences and Falwells of the world.¹⁰

In addition to these critiques, Buttigieg is also quite comfortable talking about his Christian faith from a progressive perspective.¹¹ However, Buttigieg's poise in discussing matters of faith has not won him many converts among conservative Christians. *The Resurgent's* Erick Erickson called Buttigieg's understanding of Christianity "a hypocritical farce,"¹² while the ERLC's Andrew Walker wrote, "It never fails to baffle how progressives can appeal to the Bible to arrive at an exact minimum wage (\$15, according to Buttigieg), yet ignore, reject, or plead ambiguity on the Bible's teaching on marriage and abortion."¹³ What is clear is that just as Christians across the spectrum do not have a monopoly on faith's role in politics, neither is anyone free from criticism from fellow believers and the broader culture alike.

This is not an essay about the virtues or vices of voting for Trump or whomever emerges from a crowded field of Democrats in the months ahead. Nor does it prioritize certain policies or personality traits for people of faith to consider as they cast their ballots. Instead, this essay recognizes real challenges facing Christians as they engage American politics—such as increasing polarization and partisanship along with demographic and cultural shifts—while also recognizing real opportunities for the faithful to demonstrate the hope we have in Christ.

In this sense, this essay emphasizes the need for the right posture Christians should adopt while acting politically, regardless of which candidates and policies they end up supporting. This posture should include prioritizing the *imago Dei*, embracing Christlike humility, and refusing to place our hope and salvation in politics and elections. Ultimately, while Christians are called to be in the world for the sake of the Kingdom, we must not forget where our true citizenship ultimately lies.

Challenges Ahead

In June 2012, Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy's comments on marriage created a firestorm: "I think we are inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, 'We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage.' I pray God's mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have the audacity to define what marriage is about."¹⁴ Supporters of same-sex marriage immediately condemned the remarks and asked consumers to boycott the fast-food chain, while defenders of traditional marriage urged consumers to patronize the business.¹⁵ Chicken sandwiches, waffle fries, and sweet tea were now linked to political and religious convictions. Seemingly overnight, Chick-fil-A became a flash point in the cultural battle over not only the nature of marriage but also the role of religion in the public square.

Recently, the restaurant chain's charitable foundation announced it would no longer donate to the Salvation Army and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, organizations that hold to a traditional definition of marriage. And while the foundation maintained that it regularly adds and removes groups from its funding list and that the aforementioned groups had simply completed their turn as multi-year grant recipients, some Christians criticized the decision. Radio host Eric Metaxas said that unless Chick-fil-A could guarantee that future donations would not be predicated on a recipient's stance on LGBT issues, "I will boycott Chick-fil-A and tell everyone to do the same."¹⁶ And referencing the idea that Chick-fil-A had been successfully pressured to cease donating to those groups, Rod Dreher wrote, "The progressives took the biggest culture-war scalp of all today."¹⁷ For some Christians, Chick-fil-A's decision was about much more than refocusing the direction of its charitable giving; it was about the future of American culture and faith's place in it.

Regardless of what side you are on in the great Chick-fil-A war, there is objectively no shortage of challenges facing Christians in their political engagement in the years and decades ahead. Some challenges are found in political behavior, tempting

Americans—Christians included—to hold their political opponents in utter contempt. Other challenges are demographic in nature, as more people in the United States are simply not seeing organized religion as necessary to societal flourishing. Related to demographics are cultural challenges, embodied in controversies over the future of Christianity and liberalism. Altogether, while the United States is still an exceptional nation in its relative openness to faith perspectives in the public square (especially compared to its western neighbors), storm clouds are on the horizon for Christians and other religious traditionalists.

Recent research in political science is clear: Affective polarization and negative partisanship are on the rise and together are seriously challenging American politics and government. Affective polarization troublingly links identity and politics.¹⁸ As people have increasingly sorted—geographically, religiously, online, and otherwise¹⁹—into more homogenous groups, their various identities have become more intertwined. As such, when people disagree with someone politically, they are more likely than not to disagree with them on many other aspects of life.

Similarly, negative partisanship is when people—strong and weak partisans alike—develop “increasingly negative feelings about the opposing party and its candidates.”²⁰ This means taking more pleasure in beating political rivals than winning any positive victories for one’s own side. Put simply, under a regime of negative partisanship, “owning the libs” becomes the greatest good for conservatives, and vice versa. Effective policymaking and governance are secondary to the opposition’s tears.²¹

Why are affective polarization and negative partisanship so dangerous to the future of American politics and government? Ultimately, while our system assumes (indeed, guarantees) conflict, it requires compromise to function effectively, particularly given the relentless presence and proliferation of competing factions.²² Affective polarization and negative partisanship offer no incentive to compromise. After all, when you have little in common with your opponents and you want little else than to see them defeated, what good is compromise?

Moreover, there is no reason to believe that Christians are immune to these phenomena. With the rise of social media and the ability to disconnect political discourse from face-to-face interactions where more extreme reactions may be muted, Christians may be just as likely as our non-Christian counterparts to be tempted to demonize those with whom we disagree, especially if we see the stakes as justifying such an approach to political engagement. It is no accident that, just recently, two influential conservative Christians suggested that those critical of and opposed to President Trump were under demonic influence.²³

In addition to these challenges rooted in political behavior, forthcoming demographic changes also present serious challenges for Christians in our political engagement. While Christians have historically comprised a dominant plurality (if not majority) of American society, things have slowly changed: According to the General Social Survey, Christianity, as a share of the American population, has been declining for decades.²⁴ This has long been true of mainline Protestant denominations but has also recently included white evangelicals, especially among younger Americans.²⁵ Moreover, in 2019 those identifying as religiously unaffiliated outnumbered three individual Christian traditions—white evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics—for the first time.²⁶ Just as the United States is poised to become a majority-minority nation by 2050, the US is arguably reaching a point in which Christianity is no longer its most dominant religious system.

Related to this, if demographic trends present real challenges to the future of Christian political engagement, so too do ongoing, seemingly inevitable cultural shifts. In his book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Patrick Deneen argues that the liberal order the West has embraced over the past several centuries has—by design—led to individualism and economic and technological advancements that have actually wreaked havoc on individual and collective flourishing.²⁷ The ensuing culture has become less friendly to religious orthodoxy, including traditional, conservative Christianity and those who espouse it. One need not look too closely at American culture to find evidence of this, from the US Supreme

Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision and subsequent court cases at the intersection of religious freedom and LGBT rights to corporations—such as Coca-Cola,²⁸ Gillette,²⁹ and Amazon³⁰—promoting what some Christians see as antagonistic or even hostile agendas.

Christians have reached different conclusions for a way forward, with some remaining committed to the liberal order that has guided American legal and political society³¹ and others arguing that it may be time to abandon this system in favor of “a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good.”³² But these debates over the future of liberalism are really debates over the future and trajectory of our culture, evidence that Christians—particularly conservative Christians—are finding themselves in the unusual position of becoming relegated to the sidelines of a culture in which they have, to date, more or less felt comfortable.

As these cultural and demographic changes continue to take shape, conservative Christians could more rapidly embrace the defensive political posturing of affective polarization and negative partisanship or perhaps embrace anti-liberal policies and leaders in the hopes of defending our beliefs and interests. That is, without the numbers to buttress our defenses, we may be tempted to adopt *realpolitik* as the guiding principle of our public engagement. And while I believe this is problematic for both our politics and our Christian witness, the temptation is understandable given the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Opportunities Ahead

Despite the aforementioned challenges, I argue Christians have real opportunities in the years ahead in how we engage politically. This argument assumes that Christians *should* continue to be engaged in our politics and culture. This is not a shared assumption among all Christians, especially given the aforementioned trajectory of our culture. For these Christians, the current state of politics and culture is too far gone for any meaningful or productive engagement; instead, they say, we should get our own houses and communities to prepare for the challenges ahead.³³

While it is important to maintain and strengthen our institutions in the face of a hostile culture, Christians are not called to shy away from political engagement, however one chooses to define it. Scripture is clear, from Matthew 5 to John 17 to Acts 1, that God's people are directed to be in the world for the sake of the Kingdom. And considering Aristotle's observation that human beings are, by nature, political animals, politics should be seen as a central venue for Christians to show love to our neighbors.³⁴ Understood in this way, political engagement is not optional, but rather required. And given that Christians are secure in our futures regardless of this era's political outcomes, we have several opportunities to share our hope with a world in need.

One opportunity for Christians in this political moment is to embrace the *imago Dei* as a guiding principle in our engagement. As described in Genesis 1:26, God tells His heavenly court that He is creating human beings "in Our image, in Our likeness."³⁵ While it is a rich theological doctrine, the *imago Dei* should also convict believers in the midst of deep cultural and political polarization. By maintaining that *all* people are created in the image of the eternal God, the *imago Dei* requires Christians to acknowledge that our fiercest opponents in politics and culture are likewise human and likewise image bearers.

This realization must change Christians' motivations for and attitudes toward engagement in politics. But how does it look in practice? For one, it is a charge to abandon political engagement that considers others as "other," as somehow less than. We must reject rhetoric that minimizes the humanity of those with whom we disagree. We should carefully consider how our preferred policies affect the dignity and humanity of our fellow image bearers. And we should be prepared to defend established constitutional rights for all people, regardless of belief system or perspective. This not only benefits Christians as we argue for protection under the Constitution but also demonstrates our commitment to sharing these same protections with others not like us.

Consider the ERLC's support for a group of Muslims wishing to build a mosque, cemetery, and training center in Texas. The ERLC

did not do this to affirm Islam as equal to Christianity; it did this, according to one observer, to show love to fellow image bearers for the sake of a strengthened gospel witness: “If we decide that lost people everywhere are our business,” this observer wrote, “then we can be thankful when God brings those lost people to our doorsteps.”³⁶

Another opportunity afforded to Christians as they engage politics and culture is to demonstrate the virtue of humility in our interactions with those with whom we disagree. What this *does not* mean is being prepared to abandon core beliefs or values in the face of competing perspectives; one can be humble without being weak. What this *does* mean is being willing to listen—indeed, *really* listen—to those with whom we have profound disagreements, seeking to learn from them and understand their perspective as we wrestle with the implications for our beliefs on public policy.³⁷ Such humility should be a trademark of Christian political engagement, as we should be confident enough in the truth to have difficult discussions with the world.

John Inazu articulates this point well in *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference*.³⁸ He argues that a pluralist system like the United States requires humility and authentic listening to cultivate a flourishing civic society. Inazu references the work of Jonathan Haidt, who writes that productive political engagement requires seeing important issues from different points of view.³⁹ This is especially important in an era of changing demographics, as more people are likely to come from different backgrounds, experiences, and traditions than our own. Just as importantly, though, abandoning humility for closed-mindedness demonstrates a lack of trust in the truth of Christ because if we sincerely believe that He is the author of all truth, then we should not fear encountering new and challenging perspectives. Humility, therefore, not only promotes a healthier civic society but also gives Christians the opportunity to enter into real conversations—and, in doing so, to share our faith—with a skeptical world.

Furthermore, a humble approach to politics is also important in Christian communities. Jonathan Leeman has argued that

Christians should see politics and policy in either straight or jagged lines.⁴⁰ Consider abortion: While all Christians should arrive at the same conclusion as to the *morality* of abortion, there is room for disagreement concerning *solutions* to abortion. This is why some Christians emphasize the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* as essential to decreasing the number of abortions, while others emphasize expanded social welfare policy as essential. As far as policy goes, there is not usually a one-size-fits-all answer all Christians must sign on to. Similarly, the percentage of Christians voting for a candidate in 2020 should be less important than their motivations for doing so. Fear and uncertainty should not play a role in our decision-making as believers, nor should a desire to defend the indefensible simply for the sake of beating the “other side.” Just as our hope is not of this world, Christian political engagement must be visibly different from the world’s.

Finally, Christians should be careful not to overstate the importance of politics, in light of our ultimate hope that lies in Christ. For example, every American presidential election is dubbed “the most important election of our lifetimes.” It was true in 2012, when conservatives argued that another four years of President Barack Obama would “[announce] that America should be like Western European countries—governed by left-wing values.”⁴¹ It was true in 2016, when Republicans said that a Hillary Clinton presidency would be the end of democratic republican government in America.⁴² And it is true in 2020, when Democrats say Trump gravely and uniquely threatens American democracy.⁴³ This rhetoric, coupled with the vitriol in the media and social media ecosystems, makes it understandable that Christians could allow fear and uncertainty to dictate the terms of our political engagement and behavior. Politics of a certain kind can be a strong and tempting idol, given the proximity to power it affords.

As believers, though, our identity in Christ must always remain the central component of who we are, even in the midst of deep divisions and troubles. The stakes of a given election will never be high enough to warrant watering down our identity in exchange for more effective behavior and arguments in the temporal world

of politics. We must remain firmly tied to our identity in Christ, remembering that, despite worldly trials, we have confidence in a Savior who has overcome the world and everything in it. While political engagement among Christians is worthwhile in that we can seek justice for the oppressed and promote environments for human flourishing, it is ultimately dwarfed by our confidence in Christ. And with this confidence comes hope: “Our hope is eternal, which is infinitely longer than four years in the White House or 30 years on the Supreme Court. . . . Losing political battles changes nothing about where we stand in eternity. Our hope is wholly in Christ.”⁴⁴

Conclusion: Toward A Better Form of Engagement

In this essay I have attempted to lay out the current challenges Christians face in contemporary American life and opportunities arising from these challenges. I want to end by briefly commenting on one particular approach to Christian political engagement that has been proposed in recent years and clarify a different posture that we might take while exploring this complex question further in each of our lives.

In *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Dreher compellingly argues for Christians to refocus our priorities on our own institutions and communities while generally eschewing a politics and culture in active decay.⁴⁵ He argues that Christians must turn inward and prepare for the coming storm, suggesting that only in doing so can we ever be a light unto the world. Some of Dreher’s critics have claimed he is advancing a “head for the hills” approach to political engagement and that if he were to have his way, Christians would have no voice in government, politics, or the public square.⁴⁶ Under this approach, they say, Christians are to retreat to their enclaves, huddling together and waiting for the end of the world.

This criticism is overstated and oversimplified. Dreher’s argument is for a temporary and strategic withdrawal so that Christians can strengthen their defenses before encountering inevitable

troubles. But, Christians can restore and cultivate our communities *and* remain engaged in politics and culture of our time; it is not an either-or proposition. Christians can (and should) follow Dreher’s advice to strengthen our institutions—such as churches and schools—while rethinking political engagement to emphasize posture, not outcome. After all, our highest priority should not be to win but, as with all other aspects of our lives, to proclaim the Gospel in thought, word, and deed. We can do this by emphasizing the *imago Dei*, putting on Christlike humility, and refusing to make politics our first and highest priority. There is no reason we cannot do these things while we simultaneously fortify our communities for the battles to come. A better engagement allows for both.

Dreher is right in cataloging the challenges confronting Christians today. Indeed, I have argued that Christians face real difficulties in our political engagement, such as developments in political behavior, demographic changes, and cultural shifts. But Dreher’s solution, well intended as it may be, does not allow for the sort of Christian political engagement needed in this particular moment. This engagement ought to model the grace and truth of Christ to a world desperately in need. Under this model, Christians will undoubtedly encounter major losses in the years and decades to come. And yes, some of these losses will prove more consequential than others. But Christians are not destined to win earthly battles. We have been called to something greater.

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How to Think About Voting When Your Vote Does Not (Really) Matter

Bryan T. McGraw and Timothy Taylor

One striking feature about the 2016 presidential race was the revelation for many that voting is not an especially simple act. It seems like it should be simple: figure out which candidate or party best fits your political views and vote accordingly. But what if neither candidate nor party even remotely fits your views? What if all, or at least all the mainstream, candidates have views that you find deeply unacceptable? What if you find some things to like (and dislike) about one candidate or party and other things to like (and dislike) about another and it proves difficult, maybe impossible, to simply rank the two? How can a perplexed voter feel free to vote at all?

In this short essay, we offer some advice about how to think about voting, advice that pertains not just to elections in which we find ourselves especially perplexed (or worse), but more generally to any set of electoral choices, even when we think the choices are simple and straightforward. But fair warning: In what follows, we do not aim to make the moral and political work that citizens in a representative democracy must do easy or simple. For it turns out that the act of voting, like so many of our civic responsibilities, is neither. In choosing who should represent and exercise political authority over us, we must make any number of complex, ambiguous, and morally fraught judgments that genuinely matter, even if they may be largely immaterial in terms of actually exercising political power.

Strategic vs. Sincere Voting

First, we need to think about what we are actually doing when we are voting. Assume for the moment that the voting is taking place in a relatively sizable jurisdiction where you are one of the many thousands voting for a chief executive or legislator and that the candidates are relatively well-connected to particular political parties with a relatively (though not entirely) coherent set of moral-political commitments. (Since in what follows we argue that we have to pay close attention to institutional, political, and moral contexts to think properly about voting, our conclusions necessarily will shift a bit if we are voting for executives versus legislators or voting in more parliamentary-style elections, but the main thrust will be pretty much the same.) In those sorts of circumstances, what are we doing when we vote?

It is tempting to think that we should vote as a means of achieving the best possible outcome—call this “strategic voting.” This is not an implausible way of thinking about voting since, indeed, typically the person with the most votes in an election wins, and to the degree that your vote contributes to that win, you have helped make a relatively desirable outcome occur (relative to your preferences, at least). There are any number of problems with this view of voting.

The first hangs on the phrase “to the degree that your vote contributes to that win.” In any decent-sized jurisdiction, the truth is that your capacity to effect a particular consequence is so small as to be statistically insignificant, even irrelevant. Suppose you were one of the approximately 4.8 million people in Michigan voting in the 2016 presidential race. It turned out that Donald Trump won the state by a mere 0.3 percent, or 11,000 votes.¹ Even in such a close race, an individual’s vote is just insignificant. In voting, it is hard to say that you are really doing much of anything in terms of effecting a particular outcome.² And that is all in the case your candidate or party wins; if they lose, then it is hard to say that your vote mattered at all, except maybe as a small part of some “statement” about what “some” people think or support.

It gets worse. If you are voting with an eye toward accomplishing some political end via voting for a candidate or party, you rarely have any reasonable assurance that the end you are voting for will, or even can, occur. Take the obvious problem that candidates and parties mislead voters about their intentions. Even more often, candidates and parties overpromise simply on account of the fact that they underestimate their stated policy goals' practical and institutional difficulties. Even when they genuinely want to enact sweeping (or even small) reforms, it is much harder to do than they imagine. In short, your individual vote does not (really) matter, and strategic voting is a fool's errand.

It is understandable, of course, that we would have a hard time seeing these problems with strategic voting. We all like to imagine ourselves as having significant amounts of political power—"we" are a part of "the people," and in democratic systems "the people" have the final say, right? Except that it is almost never "the people" as a whole who have a say, and even majorities almost never have a final say. And even when they seemingly do, those majorities are only temporary and ephemeral.

Most importantly, claiming that "we" have the final say in much of anything runs smack into the reality of God's providential care of the world and His *actual* final say. That is, the deepest problem with framing our voting decisions simply in terms of their consequences and strategically trying to effect one outcome over another is that such actions tend toward denying practically what we Christians say we believe doctrinally: that it is God, not us, who ultimately controls and orders history and when we act (and vote) in ways that ignore or forget that reality, we make ourselves into the objects of our own worship, our own idols. In short, strategic voting can amount to a kind of idolatry.

It would be easy here to suppose that we are offering a kind of counsel of despair, an Eeyore-like take on voting: "It does not really matter anyway." To the contrary, we believe that thinking aright about voting offers us real freedom in exercising our responsibilities as Christians and democratic citizens. Consider that once we set aside the seductive mirage of strategic voting, we no longer carry

the whole weight of responsibility for an election's outcome. We are free, we think, to exercise our civic responsibilities, including our voting, sincerely, to think about it as an expression and shaping of our moral character and in particular as primarily an expression of our best sense of what we hope our social and political order can look like.

Consider that most of us take it as a given that we should, so far as we can, live what some have called an "integrated" moral life, meaning that we try and live in such a way that our lives make sense as a moral whole.³ Although it is probably impossible to live in such a way that we never compromise or get caught in various moral contradictions, we think we should avoid them if we can. Sometimes, we might get caught in what we think of as genuine moral dilemmas—situations in which it is impossible to avoid doing evil—but otherwise, we should not take actions that do not cohere with our other considered or basic moral views. If that is right, then perhaps we should think about our voting not in terms of consequences per se but as one aspect of our (hopefully) integrated moral life. That is, we might think of voting as "expressing" something about our moral convictions and work to make our votes congruent with those convictions. We can call this "sincere voting."

Note first what is *not* going on with sincere voting: We are not merely *expressing* ourselves, as if voting were a kind of vanity project in which we had the opportunity to demonstrate our moral bona fides to anyone who would listen. It is not, in other words, electoral "virtue signaling." Rather, in *expressing* ourselves *sincerely* via our votes, we are saying something about how we would like our country (or state or whatever) to look or act. Given who *we* are, morally speaking, in voting we are (or should be) saying that we consequently think that *this* person or *that* party would best direct our political community toward its proper ends.

Voting is thus much more akin to a speech act than it is to an exercise in power. To vote in ways inconsistent with our broader (or more fundamental) moral convictions is to speak and act in ways at odds with ourselves; it is to live and act duplicitously. We can all imagine times when we might think that inescapable, but as with

all moral dilemmas, those would have to be extraordinary circumstances and demand a high level of justification. Sometimes you really do have to ally with the Soviets to beat the Nazis, but those times are few, and Nazis are not around every (political) corner.

One oddity in thinking about voting in this way is that its expressiveness is not always (or even often) public. No one, after all, has to know who it is you vote for, and even in the age of social media—where too many of us tell too much to too many—the primary audience in voting-as-expression is in fact yourself. Indeed, given the anonymity of voting, no outside audience can decipher any virtues demonstrated through one's ballot. For only you can understand (insofar as you can know) why you made the judgments you did and what moral sensibilities those judgments are in fact meant to reflect.

Indeed, even when we *do* explain our votes to others, it is not at all uncommon for them to misunderstand or misconstrue what we in fact *do* mean. But to the degree that we can understand ourselves and our own voting as expressing our sincere sense of what we would like our community to look like, we will in turn find ourselves shaped by that same voting. That is, to the degree that voting does in fact reflect our moral convictions, how we actually vote will work in turn to shape those same convictions, if for no other reason than we do indeed want to live lives that are something like an integrated whole.

People can (and do) live with tremendous hypocrisies, but if we vote in ways contrary to what we claim as our core convictions, it seems more than likely that we will look to find ways of smoothing out those contradictions, even perhaps adjusting those purportedly “core” convictions to match our voting. It may sound self-centered or even narcissistic to think about voting as in some significant way an exercise of self-development, but it is not at all unreasonable to suppose that how we act profoundly shapes who we become. It is a bit much to say that voting could cost a person his or her soul, but we should not underestimate the ways in which our willingness to compromise our deepest commitments by voting strategically can damage it indeed.

So far, though, this has all remained rather abstract and perhaps not all that helpful to those perplexed about how to vote in any particular election. Who, after all, goes into the voting booth committed to acting in defiance of his or her basic moral convictions? How does this argument in favor of “sincere voting” help us understand how to decide about whom to vote for? Suppose it is right to say that as part of one’s moral identity, you should have a sense of what a morally decent society looks like. The rather obvious corollary to that view is that you should vote in such a way that expresses and advances those same convictions. That means, at least at a first pass, voting in a way that contributes to the creation of a society ruled by a constitutional order that secures at least a reasonably just set of social, political, and economic institutions that can persist over time. People will of course reasonably and persistently disagree over what constitutes a just society, but they should nonetheless vote in such a way consistent with their own sense of what their own moral integrity demands. To borrow (and edit) President Barack Obama, in voting you should *be* the sort of just society you (penultimately) hope for.⁴

To get more practical, though, consider the following question: Would you vote for a segregationist? That is, would you vote for George Wallace, the one-time governor of Alabama who declared, in the face of federal desegregation orders, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”⁵ Our instinct is to say no, of course not, *especially* given what we have just argued above. No one should think that a racially segregated society is a just society (especially when that segregation is meant to delineate the superiority of one group over another), and to vote in favor of George Wallace (which many white, Southern Christians did in 1968) is to vote in a way that reflects and shapes oneself toward a rather profoundly immoral set of commitments.

But suppose we make things a bit more complicated and make George Wallace’s opponent not Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey but Henry Wallace, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s one-time vice president and 1948 Progressive Party candidate for president. Roosevelt kicked Henry Wallace off his 1944 ticket because it turned

out that Henry Wallace was, more or less, a Stalinist stooge, and the Progressive Party was in 1948 little more than a Communist front. Had Henry Wallace been the vice president when Roosevelt died in 1945, we would have had in the highest office in the land someone committed to following Stalin's lead. So, given the choice between the communist and the segregationist, who do you choose?

When faced with these sorts of choices, we sometimes become (even if we do not want to) the "strategic voter" and embrace a "lesser of two evils" framework while neglecting any careful attention to the things "lesser" is supposed to apply to (never mind that we should never endorse or affirm evil, anyway). We usually try and say, well, *this* issue is more important than *that* issue and because I agree with *this* candidate on the more important issue, I will go ahead and vote accordingly, even though I find myself in serious disagreement with that candidate on all sorts of other issues. That is not necessarily a terrible way to think, and if given a choice between two candidates who are more or less satisfactory on a range of issues but who sharply disagree on one important one, then if one candidate really does have a deeply immoral view on that one issue, the decision is relatively straightforward (though perhaps not entirely "clean," as you might still prefer one candidate over the other on some of the rest of the issues). But what if you are faced with the communist versus segregationist choice, a situation in which neither candidate is acceptable on what you think of as the crucial issues at play? In this case, just trying to rank order your candidates on the basis of crucial issues may not be enough to responsibly guide your choices, and we need something a bit more systematic to help. So here is a rough-and-ready framework to help you think through that; let's call this our *evaluative framework*.

An Evaluative Framework for Voting

Our evaluative framework should have, for simplicity's sake, at least two levels: constitutional and policy. At the highest level, our goal should be to vote in such a way that we express our sense of how our society should be governed in its most fundamental way.

That is, we should evaluate candidates (or parties) based on how we judge they will shape and develop our country's constitutional order, our basic institutions and practices (both formal and informal) that set the terms and conditions for everything else. We do not have to agree with Aristotle that politics is "architectonic" in any strong sense, but it seems obvious that how our basic institutions function will be quite important for everything else.⁶ Constitutional orders, even more than social and political institutions more generally, are hard to change, and if a candidate or party seems bent on damaging or warping (or refusing to reform) the constitutional order, that seems to us a good reason to not vote for them. Conversely, if a candidate or party seems genuinely committed to reform that will move our constitutional order in a more just direction, that might be a reason to override preferences you might have for another party's or candidate's policy positions.

The hypothetical communist versus segregationist example above would certainly seem to fit into this sort of constitutional criteria: Neither George Wallace nor Henry Wallace in fact embraced a basic moral vision that could in any way be thought to be just, and no one, in our view, should vote for such a person. Precisely because we are *free* to vote in accordance with our conscience, we can also choose *not* to vote, to abstain when the choices available are clearly immoral. Most of our electoral choices, thankfully, are not of this sort, whatever the sort of rhetoric that gets bandied about in our own overheated contemporary political environment. Instead, most of our disagreements occur on the level of what we can call our *policy* differences. Policy differences can range from the fairly trivial—should the marginal tax rate be 39 percent or 39.5 percent—to the more substantial, and it can be hard sometimes to figure out at what point a policy difference turns into a constitutional one.

A good rule of thumb, though, might be to think about what it would take to change or reverse course on a particular issue. If it requires what amounts to a sea change in the political order that would be all but impossible to reverse, then you have a constitutional issue. Same-sex marriage certainly counts as that, just like

the 1964 Civil Rights Act would. These are changes that not only are difficult to reverse as a matter of political procedure but also reshape the underlying social order such that it really is hard to imagine going back. Policy choices, on the other hand, might indeed be “sticky” and thus tough to change, but they could at least plausibly be changed with, say, a different party in control of Congress or a different president. Think here of the ways in which President Trump has shifted US trade policy.

Voting in regard to policy differences among candidates or parties is much more difficult and complex than voting in regard to constitutional issues for at least two reasons. First, aside from direct popular votes on referendums, we do not actually vote for policies as such but instead for individuals or parties, and those individual candidates and parties do not have preferences on just one policy but rather on a whole bundle of them. It is rare that we find, especially perhaps at the national level, a candidate or party whose preferences exactly match our own, and we may even find ourselves in a position in which we prefer one candidate with some set of policies and another candidate with other policies—and perplexed as to how we might choose between them.

Second, precisely because we vote for candidates and not policies directly, we inevitably end up voting in effect for one political party over another. Democratic politics is an inherently partisan affair, and political parties are a necessary and even beneficial part of the democratic process. But there may be times when voting for one candidate means, in effect, endorsing a party whose broad inclinations you find disreputable. This is probably especially true when trying to think about voting at different levels of government, where the parties themselves vary a lot depending on where you are. For example, a Republican in Texas and one in Massachusetts might have rather different priorities.

These kinds of difficulties multiply the closer one looks, and it would be lovely if we could give you a foolproof formula for thinking your way through them. Alas, we can do no such thing. Or, perhaps, not “alas,” for to say “alas” suggests exercising our responsibilities as democratic citizens can and should be able to be

reduced to some formula, some algorithm—and that sensibility is a profound mistake. It is a mistake because it implicitly supposes that there must always be some sort of bright and “clean” answer to our political dilemmas, that we are morally bound to choose in just one particular way, and that those who choose differently than we do must therefore be malicious. No doubt there are policy preferences that are difficult to defend morally and no doubt any number of our fellow citizens sometimes act out of malice, but a great proportion of our disagreements are not the sheer result of malice, but are just that, disagreements born out of differing judgments about complex and difficult questions. We can offer no formula precisely because no such algorithm can correspond to the reality of our political world.

Conclusion

That may seem like a bit of a downer to conclude on, but really it is not. For to say that Christians must make difficult, complex, and fallible judgments about their voting choices and that many of those choices will have trade-offs and unintended effects is not, in fact, to make our voting choices a sheer tragedy. It is instead to recognize not only the tragedy of operating in a finite world of moral and material scarcity but also the freedom we have as Christians to make those judgments and make them without the existential worry that everything always depends on us.

We have responsibilities as citizens, and we believe that Christians are called to exercise those responsibilities with wisdom and charity and to affirm with our votes as best we can a vision for how our political communities can thrive. But we do not bear the burden as individuals of always knowing fully just what we should do, so we are free to make the best choices we can and to recognize that our fellow citizens are doing likewise. And maybe in that freedom we just might find a bit of wisdom about not just our constitutional or policy choices but also how we live together when we know just a little and disagree about so much.

Notes

1. *Politico*, “2016 Michigan Presidential Election Results,” December 13, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/michigan/>.

2. The response, of course, is that, collectively, those votes do have serious effects—as the saying goes, “elections have consequences.” But we do not vote collectively; we vote as individuals and then have those individual choices aggregated. So while it might matter what we do together, it does not matter (perhaps paradoxically) what we do as individuals.

3. A. C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980); and A. C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

4. The “penultimately” is a bit of a joke but with a serious point. We should recognize that actually putting into place a fully just political order is something reserved only for the eschaton. As Immanuel Kant noted, out of the “crooked timber of humanity” nothing straight is ever made. See Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983). Plato’s *Republic* or Thomas More’s *Utopia* are pictures of fully “just” societies (the latter even less realistic than the former), neither of which we should think attractive or appropriate.

5. Alabama Department of Archives and History, “Inaugural Address of Governor George Wallace, Which Was Delivered at the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama,” <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/2952>.

6. Recall Alexis de Tocqueville’s deliberations in *Democracy in America* on the differences between the North and the South vis-à-vis slavery. He suggested that the legal protection of slavery in the South had created a “social state” of laws, mores, and habits that nearly made the two sections of the country two different societies. He thought the outcome would be a “race war” between blacks and whites, but his diagnosis of their differences surely helps explain why the Civil War occurred and was then

fought with such brutality. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Preparing the Soil: Christian Political Engagement and Democracy in the 21st Century

Peter Meilaender

When American Christians today reflect upon their ability to shape public life, they are likely to feel themselves on the defensive. For much of the past 50 years, they have been in slow but steady retreat, gradually ceding influence over more and more of the public culture. Despite occasional glimmers of hope, the overall record is not encouraging. From public prayer to internet pornography, from abortion to euthanasia, from drug legalization to family breakdown, from same-sex marriage to threats to religious liberty, a culture that was once broadly Christian now seems to be crumbling on numerous fronts. Efforts to stem the tide—such as the pro-life movement, the religious right, or conservative Supreme Court appointments—seem largely ineffective, little more than a brake that slows but does not stop the inexorable drift toward secularism.

Such a mood of despair informs influential recent Christian analyses of the contemporary scene. Two of the most important have concluded that the battle is largely over. Rod Dreher, in *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, argues that the culture wars have been lost and that Christians should retreat into small, intentional communities, seeking to nourish their faith in families, churches, and localities while escaping the worst intrusions of secular culture. Doing so, he is clear, will require discipline and sacrifice.¹

In a related vein, political scientist Patrick Deneen claims that liberalism itself, as a model of political theory and practice, has

proved to be a wrong turn. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, Deneen argues that liberalism has eroded the bonds of community that supply the necessary scaffolding for ordered liberty. It has promoted instead an atomistic individualism and the claims of the autonomous self, which is confronted—once traditional forms of community have been hollowed out—by only the bureaucratic, regulatory state.²

These are powerful diagnoses that deserve the wide attention they have received. Perhaps, however, a word of caution is in order. Serious though our contemporary challenges may be, it is not obvious that the country is genuinely worse off today than it has been in the past. America has survived comparable challenges before, just as it has been guilty of sins that rival any of our current ones. We have survived revolution, civil war, mass immigration and rapid industrialization, world wars and the Great Depression, the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation, and the radical excesses of the '60s; we have enforced oppressive chattel slavery, all but exterminated the continent's indigenous inhabitants, seized much of the Southwest in a war of aggression, confined loyal Japanese citizens to internment camps, and enforced Jim Crow laws. There is no metric for comparing these historical experiences to our current ills and determining which are "worse."

There are additional reasons to be skeptical of the most pessimistic analyses. It is not clear that they focus on the most important matters. Suppose that Christians had been more successful on some of the issues mentioned above—at rolling back abortion, for example, or holding the line against same-sex marriage or reversing the tide of family breakdown. The result would in important respects be a better society, to be sure—a more just society and a more moral society. Would it be a more Christian society? It might, but then again it might not. I see no reason to assume that these political victories would necessarily be either the cause or the fruit of a more deeply Christian society. The strength of Christianity is perhaps not best measured by its influence on political parties, legislation, or court opinions. C. S. Lewis, in an essay expressing skepticism about the idea of a Christian political party, once suggested a rather different way of understanding the success of

Christianity and its potential social influence. “He who converts his neighbor,” he wrote, “has performed the most practical Christian-political act of all.”³

Finally, it is difficult not to sense behind works such as Dreher’s or Deneen’s a deep underlying alienation from the American public. I am not sure that such alienation is politically helpful or morally uplifting. We should hesitate to presume that most of our neighbors and fellow citizens are not “really” Christian (how would we know?); we should hesitate to presume that their shortcomings, failures, and sins are worse than our own. We have it on good authority, after all, that we should first remove the beam from our own eye before removing the mote from our brother’s. For better or worse, the men and women around us—even those with whom we disagree most profoundly or who defend policies we find repugnant or in whom we have great difficulty discerning the image of God—are the neighbors whom God has given us, the fellow pilgrims with whom we must together work out our shared destiny during our decades on this earth. Conservatives, I think, should not be quick to endorse any view that involves, even if only implicitly, too great a disparagement of those with whom our lot is cast and whom we almost surely resemble more than we sometimes care to suppose.

I concede, nonetheless, that it can be difficult to feel terribly optimistic about the present political moment. This is not only because of the litany of problems already recited but also—as Dreher’s and Deneen’s books illustrate—because other factors have combined to make the present moment feel like a turning point, when received assumptions about politics are up for questioning and reexamination. Domestically, there is a widespread perception that our institutions have not been serving the middle class well, with the result that American society, to borrow a phrase from Charles Murray, has been “coming apart.”⁴ Across Western democracies, a wave of populist discontent has been reshaping political parties and governing coalitions while calling into question organs of international cooperation such as NATO and the European Union.

On the international plane, moreover, democracy finds itself challenged by a new wave of assertive authoritarian governance.⁵ For a brief period after the Cold War, it appeared that we had reached the end of history and that the grand questions of political life had been resolved in favor of liberal democracy. But those questions are back on the table, and it is not surprising that people are wondering whether our familiar answers to them had been wanting.

At such a moment, it makes sense to ask how American Christians should engage politics and the culture under contemporary circumstances. What, if anything, does Christianity have to offer our public life today? Although it is being asked now with renewed urgency, this is a perennial question and has occupied much of my own teaching and writing for the past 20 years. Drawing upon that experience, let me offer a few modest reflections. I want to suggest, first, one mistake to avoid and, second, a pair of concrete contributions Christians might make to ease our present discontents.

First, then, what not to do. Students, earnestly wanting to know how their faith should inform political activity, often want to know what public policies Christians should (and should not) support. And not only students—adult audiences looking for guidance from a Christian political scientist are often hoping for the same thing. What should we think about health care? Or immigration? Or the relative virtues of free markets or of tariffs on trade? Or the possible impeachment of President Trump? These questions, unfortunately, have no answers. There is simply no such thing as *the* “Christian immigration policy” or *the* “Christian health care system.” It is folly to think otherwise. We all know Christians who understand the principles of their faith to point in opposing directions on issues such as these.

On a narrow range of issues, the faith may point us toward a particular policy, or at least restrict our options. This is true, I think, on issues of permitted killing, such as abortion and euthanasia. I am inclined to think it is true on the issue of same-sex marriage, though that is a more complicated question. But on the vast range of public issues—establishing standards for K–12 education,

funding infrastructure maintenance, restoring the long-term viability of Social Security, determining which new weapons systems to add to our military arsenal, deciding how many immigrants to admit per year and how to divide that number among candidates for family reunification or those with desired job skills or those fleeing persecution elsewhere—on these and on most of the issues we argue about, Christians will simply disagree.

This is not because they are insincere, nor is it because they are reasoning in obviously incorrect ways. The basic tenets of the faith do not directly address these public policy issues. The application of Christian principles to politics is not a task of reasoning directly from unambiguous premises to a unique set of conclusions, like a problem in geometry; rather, it is a matter of interpreting and weighing the relative implications of more general ideals, in light of relevant empirical information and predictions about the likely consequences of different choices. In all this there is much room for legitimate disagreement.

Indeed, the effort to establish a single set of “correct” Christian policies is much more likely to do harm than good. Lewis makes this point nicely in the same essay I quoted earlier. Precisely because Christians can reasonably disagree about these prudential political judgments, any group claiming to possess the authentic Christian political agenda or platform will necessarily “represent, not Christendom, but a part of Christendom. The principle which divides it from its brethren and unites it to its political allies will not be theological.” For this reason, any such group “will be not simply a *part* of Christendom, but a *part claiming to be the whole*.” The consequences of this can only be accusations of apostasy and heresy among Christians, and of hypocrisy by non-Christians. “All this comes,” Lewis says, “from pretending that God has spoken when He has not spoken.”⁶ It is difficult to think of a more certain recipe for ensuring that Christianity be unable to leaven our political and cultural life.

This does not mean, I hasten to add, that Christianity is irrelevant to thinking about issues of public policy. To the contrary. By all means, let Christian defenders of open borders argue with all the

force at their disposal that the demands of universal charity require us to eliminate border controls, and let Christian restrictionists respond that our responsibilities to our families, communities, and fellow citizens require limits on immigration in a fallen world. Let Christian defenders of state-sponsored health care for all argue that our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable demands that a rich nation such as ours ensures access to adequate health care for all persons, and let Christian opponents point out that nothing in the faith suspends the laws of market economics or eliminates the problem of limited resources, even in a wealthy nation.

I myself certainly have opinions about Christianity's implications for these and other issues. We should want Christians of varying political stripes to advance the best reasons they can in defense of their positions, so that the rest of us, weighing those arguments, can think carefully about how best to understand and interpret the consequences of our own faith. But we should want them to do so with appropriate humility, recognizing that others, reasoning in good faith from the same premises, reach opposite conclusions. As Lewis writes of the choice among policy options, "By the natural light [God] has shown us what means are lawful: to find out which one is efficacious He has given us brains. The rest He has left to us."⁷

Whatever Christianity has to offer us, then, it will not be a specific agenda, platform, or list of authoritative policy pronouncements. Its influence must be different. Let me proceed, then, to two more constructive recommendations.

The first is implied by what I have already been arguing. Once we have recognized that the faith leaves open a wide range of potential resolutions for most political questions—have recognized that on these matters, God has given us brains and left it to us to figure out how best to proceed—this must surely check our unavoidable and innate tendencies toward self-righteousness and caution us as we engage in political debate. In anyone with a modicum of sensitivity and good sense, the realization that our opponents share many basic values with us and merely disagree about how best to implement those values must exercise a chastening influence. Our

opponents may be wrong—we should do our best to explain why they are—but their fault need not be hypocrisy or rank immorality or religious treason. It may be simply reasonable, and thus forgivable, error. Indeed, their very errors may alert us to potential blind spots in our own views. Few of us see the whole truth all on our own; few of us cannot benefit from the enriching influence of a different perspective, especially when we know it to be motivated by ideals we share.

Christians should thus bring an attitude of humility and civility to their public disagreements. In an age of high partisanship and polarization, low political trust, and often vitriolic social media, I do not think this is a small or unimportant contribution. The deeper the gaps that separate us, the greater our need for political imagination and creativity.

Too many of us have come to scorn the time-honored arts of negotiation and compromise as mere selling out. When the disagreements that divide us are minor, it is relatively easy, even for those who do not like or respect each other, to carve out some common ground. When those disagreements are wide, doing so almost surely requires an attitude of mutual respect.

Perhaps we should regard precisely such an attitude of mutual respect and civility—a willingness to treat our fellow citizens as honest and sincere (if temporarily misguided!) co-participants in a shared endeavor—as a properly political manifestation of the moral requirement of universal charity. “Respect and civility” may seem too mundane a description of charity or agape. But let us not forget how difficult it can be to display such respect and civility toward our political enemies. I myself have come to believe that such an attitude—more than any particular agenda or program—may well be the most constructive contribution Christians can make to the health of our contemporary political atmosphere.⁸

Humility, civility, and respect are always necessary for constructive democratic discourse, though perhaps our increased polarization has made them more necessary now than they would have been a generation ago. But let me now suggest a second task for Christian political engagement that is more specifically linked

to broad and deep ongoing shifts in the character of contemporary democratic politics. Across Western liberal democracies, the nature of political disagreement and the basis of partisan divisions have been changing over the past decade. Perhaps the change began earlier than that, but it has become clearly visible and better understood only recently. For anyone older than about 30 years of age, the fundamental division within democratic politics—in the United States and, in only slightly modified form, in other Western democracies—has been the partisan divide between the right and the left, between conservatism and liberalism. Proponents of limited government, free markets, traditional social values, and vigilant national defense faced off against defenders of state regulation, liberation from traditional cultural norms, and cooperative transnational institutions. This political landscape has been familiar for so long that we have come to take it for granted as an almost permanent feature of democracy.

Yet this traditional rivalry has been breaking down and is being replaced by a different one, evident in phenomena such as the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the rise of European parties such as the Alternative for Germany, the French National Rally, the Italian Lega Nord, and the Austrian Freedom Party, among others. In this emerging constellation, American citizens, like those in other Western countries, are increasingly divided not along right-left lines but rather over issues of nationalism and identity politics. Numerous analysts, Christian and non-Christian, have begun to recognize this fact, as is evident from recent works by authors such as Francis Fukuyama, Yoram Hazony, R. R. Reno, and Rich Lowry.⁹ The crucial issues driving this realignment revolve around culture, nationhood, and identity: sovereignty, immigration, free trade, and globalization. These issues cut across traditional party lines, sometimes creating alliances that look odd to those of us raised on the old battles between liberals and conservatives.

Unfortunately, this new divide has only amplified the hyperpartisan and polarized environment of American politics. What is more, the two sides in this new and intensifying debate too often seem to bring out the worst in each other, as each reacts to the

perceived excesses of the other by doubling down on its core instincts. Thus, on the one hand, the reasonable claim that America, like any country, has both a right and a duty to pay special attention to the needs and interests of its own citizens becomes a chest-thumping, aggressive jingoism with little concern for the rights (or the feelings) of other nations. On the other hand, the plausible ideas that in a shrinking world different cultures should engage one another in an attitude of mutual respect and that global problems require international cooperation become a kind of rootless cosmopolitanism, at best indifferent to the claims made upon us by our fellow citizens, at worst regarding the United States as a force for evil in the world. Each side's rhetoric persuades the other that its worst fears about its opponent are true: that the one camp consists of neofascist America First-ers, while the other would sell out American interests at the drop of a hat.

Neither alternative is terribly appealing. Sorely needed in this new ideological landscape is a perspective that can reconcile loyalty to the nation-state and to one's fellow citizens with an attitude of respect for other peoples and cultures, interest in their views about the world, and concern for their needs. Christians are well equipped to play this mediating role, recognizing the legitimate claims of both sides in this new debate while avoiding their excesses.

Christians understand that we have special obligations to care for the needs of those with whom we stand in particular relationships: family, friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners, colleagues, and our fellow citizens. The obligations we owe to these people carry special moral weight and have a certain moral priority because of the bonds we share and the mutual reliance created by a common life. These are the people whose care God has specially entrusted to us and made our particular concern. At the same time, however, Christians stand under the command of universal charity. We are to imitate God by imitating the love he extends toward all human beings. This love bursts the bounds of kin, class, race, and nation. It is universal in scope and imposes on us not merely negative duties of noninterference but also positive duties of assistance toward all men and women, everywhere.¹⁰

Navigating the tension between these competing moral demands is a permanent feature of the Christian life. It may be, therefore, that Christians can play an especially constructive role at the present moment as we seek to comprehend the immediate, practical realities, as well as the long-term implications of the nationalist resurgence that is reshaping Western politics. On the dominant issue currently dividing us politically and culturally, Christians can elucidate a perspective more satisfying than either of the chief alternatives currently on offer. The problem of rightly ordering our loves—from the most local and personal to the most global and universal—is one about which Christians have been reflecting for roughly 2,000 years. That storehouse of accumulated wisdom may yet have much to teach us as we ponder the distinctive challenges of the early 21st century. Especially if it can be brought to bear in a spirit of humility, civility, and respect.

Not a specific agenda, then, not a party platform, not a list of detailed policy proposals—these are not what Christians can rightly hope to contribute to our present political debates. Rather, we offer a kind of moral compass. Cognizant that our own political views, while informed by our faith, are not its unique expression, we can engage our fellow citizens in a posture of humble decency, arguing forcefully for our own best understanding of the faith's demands while honoring the opinions of others who may interpret our shared ideals differently. In this respect, we can model the better angels of our nature.

And, on the defining issue of our age, we offer a perspective informed by the permanent dialectic between the love of our own and the love of all. We cherish the mystic chords of memory that bind our people together while affirming also that all men are created equal. A politics informed by such a perspective may still be heated, partisan, and combative. But it would also be enriched, and thus more fertile soil in which creative solutions, wherever they originate, can take root and grow. Let us therefore prepare the soil, that the seeds may not fall on dry and rocky ground.

Notes

1. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017). I have discussed Dreher in Peter Meilaender, “Against the Integrated Life,” *Cresset* 81, no. 5 (September 2018): 4–12, http://thecresset.org/2018/Trinity/Meilaender_T18.html.

2. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

3. C. S. Lewis, “Meditation on the Third Commandment,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 216.

4. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).

5. See, for instance, Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

6. Lewis, “Meditation on the Third Commandment,” 214. (Emphasis in the original.)

7. Lewis, “Meditation on the Third Commandment,” 215. For another nice and helpful treatment of the same issue, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Political Controversy,” in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), 59–61.

8. For a discussion of this point, see Peter Meilaender, “Listening for the Mild Voice of Reason: Christian Pragmatism on the Edge of the Fiscal Cliff,” *Cresset* 76, no. 3 (February 2013): 42–45, http://thecresset.org/2013/Lent/Meilaender_L2013.html.

9. See Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); R. R. Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2019); and Rich Lowry, *The Case for Nationalism: How It Made Us Powerful, United, and Free* (New York: Broadside Books, 2019).

10. I have advanced the argument of the preceding two paragraphs in similar form but in a different context in Peter Meilaender, “Crossed Lines: The Importance of Translation in an Era of Growing Political Difference,”

Cresset 83, no. 1 (December 2019): 4–10, http://www.thecresset.org/2019/Michaelmas/Meilaender_M19.html.

Defending Liberty, Loving Neighbor

Brad R. Hale and Abbylin H. Sellers

Any American citizen considering if and how to engage in politics, particularly in an explicit way (by running for office or working in politics), would be right to count the costs before joining the fray. The citizen must weigh the likely disruption to family life, the financial costs, and the loss of privacy against the potential benefits of effecting positive change, or perhaps halting negative consequences, in the wider community. The Christian citizen might also reflect on the ways in which serving the City of God might also serve the Earthly City, or vice versa. Moreover, one need not know much history to understand that becoming preoccupied with the earthly and impermanent could distract from the heavenly and eternal.

In addition to these calculations, Americans contemplating politics have also been confronted with many of their fellow citizens' loss of confidence in America's foundational ideas, anachronistically but fairly labeled "liberalism" or "classical liberalism." Liberalism begins with the belief that individuals are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, including free speech, the free exercise of religion, the right to bear arms, and the right to private property. It assumes that the best way to ensure these rights is through a government determined by the consent of the governed and limited in its powers. Over the past decades, rapid technological and economic changes, often but not always related, have raised doubts about liberalism's capacity to promote the flourishing of American citizens. Further, vitriol on the internet, the 2015 Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and killings on school campuses have generated doubts about the relevance of

the US Constitution’s protection of what were once considered unalienable rights.

Misgivings about liberalism’s relevance for the 21st century have, naturally, resulted in Americans looking for political alternatives. According to a recent Gallup poll, for example, 43 percent of Americans said they were ready to “embrace” socialism in “some form.”¹ It is not always clear how the respondents to polling understood or defined “socialism,” or if they even had a definition in mind. Even so, this poll confirms a pessimism regarding America’s founding principles, which is evidenced in the strong showing of avowed socialist Bernie Sanders in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential primaries and in the 2018 electoral success—and subsequent celebrity status—of socialist members of the House of Representatives.

While the far left’s rejection of classical liberalism may not be entirely surprising, it has been matched by at least some conservatives whose influence seems to be growing. The conservative skepticism is articulated most clearly in Patrick Deneen’s book, *Why Liberalism Failed*.² Deneen, a Christian political philosopher, argues that liberalism was fundamentally flawed from the beginning, especially as formulated in the American founding. According to Deneen, liberalism, as written into the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution, has been undone not by its most aggressive enemies but by its “inner logic” and “self-contradictions.”³ Despite liberalism’s emphasis on individual rights and limited government, the state has grown and increasingly intruded into citizens’ lives. As liberalism fulfilled its promise, it also “generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology.”⁴ Thus, as Deneen pithily writes, liberalism “has failed because it has succeeded.”⁵ America’s political, social, and cultural ills in the 21st century, then, were pre-determined by the liberalism of America’s founding.

If this is indeed the case, then the Christian citizen might be forgiven for turning from political engagement altogether. If, as Deneen suggests, “the problem is not in just one program or application but in the operating system itself,”⁶ there is little reason to

work through an inherently flawed system only to perpetuate the social and cultural damage of liberalism.

It would be entirely rational for Christians to reject political involvement in favor of Rod Dreher's "Benedict Option," albeit a misreading of it. Although Dreher explicitly says, "the point is not that we should stop voting or being active in conventional politics,"⁷ many Christians, inspired by the book's title and Deneen's despair over the American experiment, might be tempted to withdraw from the political arena to focus on building *only* local, especially Christian, communities. The failed success of liberalism would then run its course as Christians await an opportune time to reemerge.

Deneen's argument is a cogent and reasonable explanation of liberalism's logical outcomes, provided one assumes that historical events, social movements, and new ideas and technology would have little effect on the trajectory of an idea. As Dennis Hale and Marc Landy have noted, Deneen envisions a liberalism essentially unaffected by historical events such as the Reformation and the religious wars of early modern Europe. Additionally, in Deneen's telling, the American founders read and absorbed Lockean ideas in their purest form and applied them unaware of and unshaped by their own historical circumstances.⁸ For Deneen, the major events of America's prehistory and history play little role in the story of a disembodied idea unfolding according to a prescribed internal logic.

This kind of historical determinism should not be allowed to drive the conversation about Christian engagement in politics. While ideas undoubtedly have consequences, they nevertheless do not—in fact they cannot—act on their own. Ideas take effect only when they are appropriated by human actors and therefore never follow a pristine philosophical construct's internal logic. As human beings arrogate and implement ideas in a particular social, cultural, political, and technological context, they shape those ideologies as much as—if not more than—they are shaped by them.

The historical truth that liberalism does not have a predetermined life of its own should, accordingly, encourage the politically minded Christian. If liberalism is in crisis, it is not because it is

inherently flawed and will inevitably lead to American decline, particularly in the realm of culture. If Christians act to shape the future of the liberal regime, the American experiment, they might be able to restore the necessary bond between liberalism's emphasis on freedom with obligation and responsibility.⁹ Should Christians despair like Deneen, the trajectory of decline of American society, politics, and culture seems altogether certain. However, with the right vision, the right training, the right approach, and a commitment to hard work, Christians can renew and restore the ideas of the American experiment.

Habits of the Heart, Soul, and Mind

Despite Deneen's historical determinism, much good can be gleaned from his call for "better practices."¹⁰ Deneen's notion of "better practices" is vaguely defined, but he endorses Dreher's Benedict Option, which makes specific recommendations for building Christian communities in light of a culture and politics increasingly antagonistic to Christians and their most basic beliefs.

Of particular interest are Dreher's wise suggestions for Christians serious about preparing the next generation. Creating a counterculture that can not only withstand the assaults of the current culture but also work to renew liberalism's promise has to be done by intentional spiritual focus in the home, solid catechism in the church, and training in the academy, from elementary to higher education. These elements of Christian formation and discipleship are paramount for Christians, irrespective of the political system. Nor, however, are they at odds with political engagement and the preservation of liberalism. Rather, for Christians, they should be seen as fundamental preparation for lives of faith and citizenship.

Dreher's Benedict Option calls for Christians to strengthen their spiritual communities, beginning with their families. He argues, "If there is going to be authentic renewal, it will have to happen in families and local church communities."¹¹ The call to put God first in the home requires setting priorities. After all, when families are stretched thin with commitments pulling each person in

a number of directions, prioritizing faithful living can seem somewhat daunting.

Some of Dreher's recommendations seem obvious, but they are nonetheless places to start: engaging in regular family prayer and devotions, placing church life above work or sports, and being mindful of media consumption. Parents should model their commitment to their faith for their children. Building a foundation of faithful families should also fortify the community of fellow believers. The church social network is powerful when mobilized, helping those in need and holding one another accountable.

Key to strong churches is catechesis. Fortunately, many churches persist in solid and deep doctrinal instruction. However, too many evangelical churches, especially those with no clear denominational ties, fail to do so. In such cases, it becomes difficult for Christians to realize Paul's injunction to the Romans not to conform "to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." If all spiritual growth is connected to the mind and Christians are unaware of foundational biblical principles, chances are they will more readily conform to the dictates of society.¹² All Christian churches, then, need to take catechism seriously.

Fortunately, for those churches that have fallen out of practice, there are numerous resources. Established catechisms, such as *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* or *The Heidelberg Catechism*, and newer ones, such as *The New City Catechism*, can at the very least serve as the basis for a church that wants to renew the practice.¹³

In addition to training in church doctrine, Christians need to recommit to the liberal arts—the arts of freedom—as a project of Christian education. For too long, the nature of the liberal arts has been framed by secular institutions. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), for example, states that it will advocate for "liberal education by demonstrating and championing the economic and civic value of a liberal education, [and] its ongoing relevance to students' career aspirations."¹⁴ While the AAC&U notes that "lifelong learning" and "personal flourishing" are also benefits, the organization emphasizes the instrumental over the spiritual.¹⁵ Thankfully, the classical Christian school movement for

K–12 education has begun to counter the secular approach with a more forthrightly Christian version of the liberal arts and, in doing so, has gained momentum over the past decades.¹⁶

There are some positive signs in Christian higher education, but too many Christian colleges and universities have fallen prey to vocationalism, instrumentalism, and consumerism at the expense of liberal arts. This will change only if alumni, especially donors, pressure their alma maters to rebuild the liberal arts. In addition, Christian parents should look beyond the economic payoff and demand a rich education in the arts of freedom for their students. Christian philanthropists might also help by creating centers in classical learning and the liberal arts at established Christian colleges and universities—or perhaps even by founding their own new institutions.

Remembering What Politics Really Is

Having first invested in building our own formative communities and developing the habits that prepare us to live in a liberal society, how are we as Christians to practically engage with culture, society, and politics in 2020?

The possible approaches vary, ranging from a partial withdrawal from modern-day culture to fully engaging (and assimilating) with society. While one is not *necessarily* more right or wrong than the other, we advocate for a combination of James Davison Hunter’s “faithful presence” and Andy Crouch’s “culture making.” Both approaches broaden our view of politics, remind us to primarily focus on the micro—rather than the macro—level, and help us realize that politics is fundamentally about loving our neighbors.

Davison Hunter makes the case that, realistically, we as Christians are likely not going to actually change the world. Even though Christians are constantly reminded that just one person can make a difference, several factors are at play that extend far beyond an individual. Davison Hunter argues that this “idealism misconstrues agency, implying the capacity to bring about influence where that capacity may not exist or where it may only be weak . . . [and]

underplays the importance of history and historical forces and its interaction with culture as it is lived and experienced.¹⁷ He does not discount the importance of renewing hearts and minds of those *in* the world but sheds light on what Christians' relationship to culture should be. Davison Hunter's "faithful presence" is rooted in God being "fully and faithfully present to us."¹⁸ This commitment of God's pursuit of us, His identification with us, the life He offers, and His sacrificial love require a right relationship with our Creator.

Following from that premise, a theology of "faithful presence" is an intentional focus on those who are in our immediate circle of influence: the people in our communities, neighborhoods, and cities. Instead of changing the world, we are to bear witness to it through our actions. We are to do this while "affirming the centrality of the church itself."¹⁹

Davison Hunter rightly points to the church as an established institution where the sum is greater and larger than the parts or individuals. In a world where institutions are faltering, the church is a genuinely local institution where people can go and encourage neighbors to do likewise. As a neighborhood institution, then, the church offers Christians an advantage in engaging politics and culture.

Crouch also recognizes the notion of changing the world is a tall order. Ultimately, we have to remind ourselves of our human capacities and limitations. While we strive for the grand, we cannot lose sight of the small scale in our communities.

However, what Crouch adds to Davison Hunter is the idea of being a culture maker. Crouch argues, "Culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact *part of the world* that every new human being has to make something of."²⁰ Crouch's assertion to make more culture or create something new is embodied in tangible creations, such as changed policy, law, or media. To reach maximum effectiveness, Christians must operate in already cultivated communities and among established relationships. Thus, Crouch calls us to creative service to Christ full time in our own particular sphere of culture.²¹

A Local, Personal Agenda for Christian Political Engagement

Even with this general framework, we may find ourselves wondering what we are actually to do. Here, we do not intend to provide an all-encompassing program for Christian political engagement *writ large*. Not only does this seem impractical for most Christians, but we should also bear in mind George Eliot's encouragement that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts."²² Instead, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities described above, we hope to provide real, feasible steps that each of us can take in our personal lives.

We must ask ourselves: How are we meeting local needs? Are we taking time to engage with those outside the walls of our churches? Are we bearing witness by our actions, as Davison Hunter posits? Are we following and living the commands from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to be salt and light to the world?²³ While our churches are good launching points for community outreach, we have to be willing to engage with others who are in the world.

The spirit of volunteerism is an avenue of localism readily available to us. The Corporation for National and Community Service reports in 2018:

77.34 million adults (30.3 percent) volunteered through an organization last year. Altogether, Americans volunteered nearly 6.9 billion hours. . . . Millions more are supporting friends and family (43.1 percent) and doing favors for their neighbors (51.4 percent), suggesting that many are engaged in acts of "informal volunteering."²⁴

In our fast-paced and activity-filled lives, "informal volunteering" makes sense. Each day there are likely opportunities to extend helping hands to friends, family, and neighbors. This can be done simply by running errands, walking a dog, or visiting an elderly neighbor. We can let our light shine with our immediate circle of influence and work on extending it from there. What this requires of us is a concerted effort to be aware of the needs of others and make the time.

In terms of politics, Crouch, Davison Hunter, and Deneen all point to the axiom attributed to Tip O'Neill: "All politics is local." While the former Speaker of the House of Representatives meant to convey the importance of congressional members focusing on their constituent needs in their home districts and not just the politics of Washington, DC, Christian citizens can glean something from this.

Because of technology and the growth of the federal government, citizens may be tempted simply to think on a macro scale and equate political involvement with federal politics and Washington, DC. Unfortunately, this tendency comes at the expense of paying attention to local politics and news. Thus, we need to reshape our citizen understanding of what doing politics entails.

If Davison Hunter, Crouch, and Deneen are correct about the need for Christians to turn our attention and engagement to our local spheres of interaction and influence, this can and should include politics—which, at the local level, is not as insurmountable a challenge as seeking to influence policymaking in Washington, DC. In short, there really are no excuses for political and cultural inactivity.

There are the obvious means for civic engagement, such as voting, attending local city council meetings, or even running for elective local office. We might take these things for granted, but local elections tend to have the lowest voter turnout, with nationwide averages at 27 percent of eligible voters.²⁵ While studies have determined a number of factors accounting for low turnout such as voter fatigue, differing dates from national and statewide contests, and inability to find the right polling places, these are minor obstacles for the committed individual willing to put in the time and effort. We must ask ourselves, then: How important is our civic duty to not just ourselves but our communities?

With more than 90,000 government units in the United States, including roughly 12,880 school district governments, the local opportunities to actually run for elective office are considerable. Approximately 2 percent of Americans have run for elected office at any level (federal, state, or local).²⁶ Not every person is called to

run for elective office, but the prospects are readily available in our local communities. Holding elective office is likely one of the most direct ways to make culture, through governance and the creation of new laws. If God is calling us to serve in this capacity, will we heed and be obedient?

This realm of politics is even more pressing considering that a citizen's influence at the local level is substantially greater than at the state or federal level in terms of tangible engagement and policy outcomes. Yet, in 2012, the National Research Center surveyed over 200 communities and found only 19 percent contacted an elected official and roughly a quarter attended a public meeting.²⁷

Realizing time is a limited commodity in our fast-paced society and as technology continues to advance, more and more city council meetings are livestreamed, and town hall meetings are hosted online. Moreover, with the decline of local news organizations, engaged Christians could revive local newspapers in some form, perhaps by establishing a blog about city council meetings or other local concerns. With the ability to participate from the comforts of our own home, will we?

As previously mentioned, the need to return to a liberal education in the academy is a starting point for instilling civic virtue. On the local level, we might help create culture by forming reading and discussion groups around great works. Book clubs are popular, but this is meant to be deeper than Oprah. Done well, these groups could democratize liberal education and make it accessible to our fellow citizens.

They could also appeal to a broad range of citizens, from the college-age student to those who have graduated and are yearning for intellectual stimulation to those who have always wanted to read great works but never had the time. The intergenerational nature provides for interactions that may not otherwise happen on their own. This, alone, is a worthy goal in our efforts to build culture in our communities.

Discussion groups around the great works will also enrich current political conversations. As C. S. Lewis argued, reading older books, usually great works, expands our perspective.

Every age has its own outlook. [Our age's outlook] is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period.²⁸

As we read and discuss works by authors such as Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, or Homer among own congregations and churches, there can be substantive conversations on the implications of the ideas inherent in these works and how they have enriched Christians and our faith. The informal study of great works will cultivate informed citizens as we think about what we can learn from the past, contemplate life's most pressing questions, and consider how we can develop moral virtue.

While the idea of this type of reading group may be intimidating, those of us who are educators and may have the good fortune of teaching these works can serve our congregations by leading these reading groups or at least helping get them underway. The church can be a starting point for a reading group, but it can also extend out into our neighborhoods and local communities.

Reading groups established around nonpolitical books might also help defuse political tensions among neighbors. The 2016 election brought a high level of polarization across the nation, deeply dividing citizens, family members, and friends. The art of engaging in discussion and attempting to understand viewpoints contrary to one's own was replaced with shutting down discussion, severing relationships, and distrusting friends and neighbors. This division was not limited to non-Christians. In the midst of this polarization, we have to be proactive in determining the best means to engage in civil discourse about politics.

While liberal arts reading groups might be one way to do this, we might also join associations such as Better Angels, a nonprofit citizens' organization founded to find ways to respectfully disagree with those who hold different political views while attempting to find common ground.²⁹ Workshops are hosted all around the country, bringing together citizens from different ideological perspectives. Better Angels provides trained moderators to walk individuals

(five to eight Republican-leaning citizens and five to eight Democratic-leaning citizens) through a series of half-day exercises that encourage conversation. The end of the workshop focuses on a call to action, asking participants what they can do as individuals, as members of their political affiliation, and together—across ideological lines—“to promote better understanding of differences and search for common ground.”³⁰

The formal concept of Better Angels serves as a model, but we can also engage on an informal, personal basis with someone we know who holds differing political views. We must go into it though with a mindset and desire to listen to others and endeavor to foster mutual understanding. This requires exercising a level of humility. As Christians, we are called to love of others and unity instead of pride and focusing on self.³¹ What better way to practice than with those with whom we disagree?

Conclusion

As 2020 begins, political discussions will likely be consumed with state and, more likely, federal elections. As Christian citizens, we should, of course, pay attention to federal and state politics. However, we should not lose sight of our responsibility to our neighbors, remembering that politics is, in its essence, a means by which we love our neighbors. This certainly means treating them with courtesy in political conversations. It also means advocating for their liberty and natural, God-given rights.

Since the American experiment—liberalism—has the best historical record of preserving and furthering liberty, we work to sustain it as a means of loving our neighbors. To do so requires not only involvement in the national arena but also the hard work of cultivating our local communities for the responsibilities and privileges of freedom.

Notes

1. Mohamed Younis, “Four in 10 Americans Embrace Some Form of Socialism,” Gallup, May 20, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/257639/four-americans-embrace-form-socialism.aspx>.

2. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Books, 2018).

3. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.

4. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.

5. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3.

6. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 179–80. Deneen here might prefer to employ his term “anticultural.”

7. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 98.

8. Dennis Hale and Marc Landy, “Blame the Fathers,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2018.

9. Galatians 5:13 (English Standard Version).

10. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 197. Deneen champions localism: “What we need today are practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life. Not a better theory, but better practices.”

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12. Mark Patterson, “Living Sacrifices,” *Romans* 12, September 1, 2019.

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19. Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, 282.

20. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 25.

21. Crouch, *Culture Making*, 13.

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our-story/. “We unite red and blue Americans in a working alliance to *Depolarize America*. Instead of asking people to change their minds about key issues, we give all Americans a chance to better understand each other, to absorb the values and experiences that inform our political philosophies, and to ultimately recognize our common humanity.”

30. Better Angels, <https://www.better-angels.org/>.

31. Philippians 2:3 (English Standard Version). “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

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