

Evangelical Intellectuals' Criticisms of the Religious Right: Is This the End of the Evangelical-Republican Marriage?

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Introduction

“The Republican Party,” insisted one-time Republican Party strategist Kevin Phillips, “has become the first religious party in U.S. history.”¹ Since the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s and Ronald Reagan’s presidential victory in 1980, observers, supporters, and detractors have had good reason to identify evangelicals as political conservatives who form the core constituency of the Republican Party. In his 2000 election, George W. Bush won sixty-eight percent of the white evangelicals who voted. In 2004, the Bush-Cheney campaign, working with the Republican National Party as well as conservative organizations like Focus on the Family, brought in four million new evangelical voters to win seventy-eight percent of the white evangelical vote.² When a White House official phoned James Dobson the day after Bush’s reelection to thank the Focus on the Family’s president for helping to turn out the conservative Protestant vote, Dobson reportedly informed the operative that Bush owed his victory in large part to concerned Christian voters. Dobson warned that if the president’s administration snubbed its conservative Christian supporters, especially when it came to filling Supreme Court vacancies, Republicans would “pay a price in four years.”³ Four years later, the Religious Right’s leaders continued to encourage followers to vote Republican. For instance, in a book published just before the 2008 election, *How Would Jesus Vote?*, D. James Kennedy, pastor of a

¹ Kevin Phillips, “How the GOP Became God’s Own Party,” *Washington Times*, 2 April 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/01/AR2006040100004.html?referrer=emailarticlepg>.

² Dan Gilgoff, “Winning With Evangelicals: How the 2004 Presidential Race Turned on Religious Outreach,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 25 February 2007, available at: http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/070225/5excerpt_3.htm.

³ David Kirkpatrick, “Some Bush Supporters Say They Anticipate a ‘Revolution,’” *New York Times*, 4 November 2004, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/04/politics/campaign/04conserve.html>.

conservative Presbyterian mega-church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, argued that one can provide a simple answer to that question: Jesus “left us all sorts of commands and principles to follow.” Kennedy acknowledged ambiguity sometimes exists in the principles that “well-meaning” Christians fight over. But at the end of the day, Kennedy’s work points unambiguously to the conclusion that Jesus would vote Republican.⁴

Despite the apparent solidarity between evangelicals and the Republican Party going into the 2008 election, fissures began to appear in the marriage of evangelicals and the Republicans. Three and a half million more evangelicals voted in the 2008 election than did in 2004. One might think this boded well for the Republicans, but it did not. Barack Obama succeeded in attracting more evangelical voters than his Democratic predecessors in the 2000 and 2004 elections. Obama won twenty-four percent of the white evangelical vote compared to twenty-one percent for John Kerry in 2004. This modest increase, however, masks the appeal that Obama had among younger evangelical voters. Among white evangelical voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, Obama won thirty-two percent of the vote, which doubled the sixteen percent that Kerry won in 2004. Obama also performed significantly better than Kerry among white evangelicals voters between the ages of thirty and forty-four by winning twenty-three percent of these voters compared to Kerry’s twelve percent.⁵

Other emerging signs suggest the evangelical-Republican marriage may be in trouble. Self-identifying evangelical scholars, many of whom have spent their careers in conservative circles, have begun to criticize the Religious Right. To be sure, the Religious Right has had

⁴ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *How Would Jesus Vote? A Christian Perspective on the Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2008), 21-22.

⁵ Laurie Goodstein, “Obama Made Gains Among Younger Evangelical Voters, Data Shows,” *New York Times*, 6 November 2008, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/us/politics/07religion.html>. For a detailed scholarly assessment of the “God gap” in the 2008 election, see Corwin E. Smidt et al., *The Disappearing God Gap? Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010).

plenty of antagonists, but something different may be going on here. Insiders are criticizing the movement, not secular-media elites or left-wing academics who are ridiculed by popular TV and radio personalities. The insiders are not religious liberals, such as James Cone, who combine theological liberal convictions with politically liberal politics. They are not evangelical liberals like Jim Wallis who blend conservative theology with progressive politics. In some circles, of course, the very idea of an evangelical liberal sounds oxymoronic. This faulty conception indicates how closely evangelicals have been associated with political conservatism since the late 1970s. The recent flourish of criticisms by these insiders is different, however, and it would be naïve to identify them with secular liberals, religious liberals, or evangelical liberals.

A brief survey of these insiders' critiques provides some insight into the perceived weaknesses of the Religious Right. In summary, these sympathetic critics identify significant problems in the Religious Right's strategy, tactics, theology, and politics. If the evangelicals and Republicans were once a happy couple, these recent assessments suggest the marriage may be on the rocks.

James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World: The Religious Right's Dependence upon Politics is Destined to Fail*

James Davison Hunter is one of the few internationally-recognized scholars who is an evangelical. A graduate of Gordon College with a doctorate in sociology from Rutgers University, Hunter holds an endowed chair at the University of Virginia, where he also directs the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. One of Hunter's works, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, casts a scholarly light upon the dramatic restructuring of religion in contemporary America. Republican Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan helped make the concept of "culture wars" part of the American political landscape with his fire-and-brimstone

culture war speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention.⁶ Hunter is also an evangelical Christian, and serves as an elder in Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville. That church is a congregation in the conservative Presbyterian Church of America and not the liberal mainline Presbyterian denomination.

Hunter's recent work, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, is a serious scholarly study of contemporary religion and politics. Drawing upon sociological theory regarding culture and cultural change, Hunter analyzes the political activities of the Religious Right, liberal Christians, and Neo-Anabaptists. While his research examines all three religious traditions, this paper will focus solely upon his analysis of conservative Protestants. In his book, Hunter's thesis is quite simple: Conservative Christians (just like liberal Christians and Anabaptists) aspire to change the world. The way they think about culture and cultural change, however, is fundamentally flawed. As a result, evangelicals' aspirations to transform American society are destined to fail.

Conservative Christians assume that if they can change "the hearts and minds of people," Hunter observes, these people will, in turn, have the proper values that will allow them to make the right decisions and then be able to change the world. Chuck Colson provides an example of this strategy. According to Colson, "If our culture is to be transformed, it will happen from the bottom up—from ordinary believers practicing apologetics over the backyard fence. . . . The real leverage for cultural change comes from transforming the habits and dispositions of ordinary people."⁷ Along with evangelism, conservatives use political action and social reform to achieve their goal. Hunter contends that "the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in

⁶ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics* (New York: Basic, 1992).

⁷ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

America since the early 1980s has been a political witness.” He concludes, however, that the “transformed-people-transform-culture” tactics of Colson are “almost wholly mistaken.”⁸

The fundamental flaw of conservative Christian dependence upon political action is their faulty understanding of culture and cultural change. Conservatives wrongly assume a view of cultural change that arises from a framework of market populism. Hunter explains the logic of this strategy: “Change comes through the random aggregation of individual actions and choices in a free market of options.” Hunter calls this view of cultural change “naïve.”⁹ He proposes an alternative theory that entails more than just evangelism, politics, and social reform. Long-term culture change, Hunter believes, requires a fundamental restructuring of the institutions of cultural formation and transmission in society. This restructuring involves constructive action within the market, government-sponsored cultural institutions, education, advertising, entertainment, publishing, the news media, and the church (which is nearly always overlooked by conservative Christian political activists). “Legislation may be passed and judicial rulings may be properly handed down,” Hunter argues, “but legal and political victories will be short-lived or pyrrhic without the broad-based legitimacy that makes the alternatives seem unthinkable.”¹⁰

“Traditional” or agrarian societies, Hunter contends, are mainly held together by beliefs held in common to all its members. Modern societies, by contrast, are united through social and economic interdependence. In democratic societies, the state plays an especially critical role because of its power to coerce a certain degree of conformity to public laws and politics. Hunter maintains the state “has increasingly become the incarnation of the public weal. Its laws, policies, and procedures have become the predominant framework by which we understand

⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 12, 16-17.

⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 30.

¹⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 46.

collective life, its members, its leading organizations, its problems, and its issues.” As the cultural consensus grows weaker, “there has been a turn toward politics as a foundation and structure for social solidarity.”¹¹ Consequently, nearly every aspect of American public life is politicized.

According to Hunter, the mythic ideal of a rightly ordered society animates conservatives. Based upon a highly selective reading of American history, conservative Christians assert that America was founded as a “Christian nation.” The conservatives, therefore, insist that the Christian faith played a determinative role in shaping every aspect of American culture, especially concerning public policies and laws. Measured against this “golden age,” any change provides evidence of America’s slide into secularism, which threatens conservative Christians’ custodianship and sense of entitlement over American culture. Hunter notes that many aspects of American culture explicitly contradict evangelical Christian values, and several of his other books provide irrefutable documentation of these changes. Conservative Christians, however, prey upon the fears about secularization in order to marshal support for their political agenda, Hunter argues. The Religious Right carefully cultivates a political culture of *ressentiment*. Hunter provides a myriad of examples to substantiate this point. For instance, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council insists that “[d]eep in the nation’s capital, America’s culture was hijacked by a secular movement determined to redefine society from religious freedom to the right to life. These radicals were doing their best to destroy two centuries of traditional values.”¹² According to Hunter, the Religious Right trades upon conspiracies and histrionics in order to motivate political action.

¹¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 102-103.

¹² Chris Hedges, “Feeling the Hate with the National Religious Broadcasters,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2005, 55-61, quoted in Hunter, *To Change the World*, 115.

Conservative Christians, Hunter further notes, employ two tactics to “take back America for Christ”: prayer and, more importantly, political action. Despite strategic claims of nonpartisanship, which enable lobbying organizations to preserve their tax-exempt status, the Religious Right engages in unbridled political action to gain a controlling influence over American politics and culture. The Religious Right has labeled Democrats as part of America’s problem, perceiving the Republican Party as the best means of achieving its agenda. When Republicans even appear to depart from their agenda, evangelical leaders are eager to play political hardball as Dobson did in the aftermath of the Republican victory in the 2004 presidential election. Hunter discerns that certain changes among conservative Christians are in motion. With the deaths of Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy, the Religious Right has lost two key leaders. Other leaders of the evangelical movement, such as Rick Warren, are not as openly partisan. While some evidence indicates that younger evangelicals are turned off by the Religious Right’s militancy and partisanship, Hunter concludes that conservative Christians continue to place their trust in politics for achieving their well-intentioned hope to making the world a better place.

Hunter’s thesis pivots on his understanding of the relationship between culture and politics. According to Hunter, culture is upstream from politics. Consequently, genuine long-term cultural change can only be successfully achieved by constructively engaging society’s key culture-shaping institutions. Not only does his sociological theory support this conclusion (not surprisingly), but he also cites the effectiveness of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, and other historical examples as evidence to substantiate his analysis. At first blush, this might sound like another call to man the ramparts and attack secular institutions in order to restore some sort of Constantinian vision of “Christian

America”—but it is not. Hunter, instead, recommends a theology of a “faithful presence.” This is not some dreamy utopian vision of return to the good-old-days of “Christian America,” but is a robust evangelical theology of constructive cultural engagement that stresses cooperation among individuals and institutions to serve the common good. As Hunter writes, “If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world, it is precisely because it is not rooted in a desire to change the world for the better but rather because it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God’s command to love our neighbor.”¹³

Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner’s *City of Man: The Religious Right Is Bad for Politics and Fails to Appreciate What Politics Can and Cannot Do*

Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner categorically reject the fundamental assumption in Hunter’s analysis. As they write, “Culture is upstream from politics, except in those important cases when politics is upstream from culture.”¹⁴ To Gerson and Wehner, conservative Christians need to be involved in politics because every citizen in a representative democracy shares in the responsibility of governing. In their evaluation, Hunter underestimates the important role that the state and the political process have in the formation of culture.

Their position is not surprising. After all, the authors are Christian politicians. Both also worked in the Bush administration, Gerson as a policy advisor and the chief presidential

¹³ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 234. As an interesting aside, Chuck Colson responded to Hunter in *Christianity Today* and basically said that the difference between the two were not quite as significant as Hunter suggested. He also expressed a concern that Hunter was advocating Quietism. In his reply to Colson, Hunter refused to back away from what he perceived as critical differences over their respective views of culture and the Religious Right’s politicization of everything and efforts to cultivate a culture of resentment as the key to social change. Chuck Colson, “More than Faithful Presence,” *Christianity Today*, 14 May 2010 available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/mayweb-only/29-52.0.html>; James Davison Hunter, “Faithful Presence Is Not Quietism,” *Christianity Today*, 21 May 2010, available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/mayweb-only/30-51.0.html>.

¹⁴ Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 131.

speechwriter, and Wehner as the director of the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives.

Today, Gerson is a columnist for the *Washington Post* and Wehner is a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. Besides being Republicans, both are also self-identifying evangelicals.

Despite the fact that Gerson and Wehner dispute the heart of Hunter's analysis, the Religious Right will find little solace in their recent work, *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era*. According to Gerson and Wehner, conservative Christianity has entered into a period of transition. Like Hunter, the deaths of Falwell and Kennedy along with the fading influence of James Dobson and Pat Robertson signal the passing of the Religious Right's old political theology. Another "still unformed" political theology, they argue, "is taking its place."¹⁵ In this brief and popular book published by Moody Press in 2010, the authors assess the Religious Right and propose a new political theology of evangelical political engagement. This political theology stands in sharp contrast with the political theology of both the Religious Right and progressive liberals.

While Gerson and Wehner unabashedly advocate Christian participation in American politics, they demonstrate little patience for the Religious Right. Yet, they do not find the Religious Right without any democratic virtues. Gerson and Wehner approve of the Religious Right's efforts to promote democratic engagement by mobilizing voters, training activists, and conducting marches. These demonstrations are the kind of grass-roots activities that political liberals applaud. The two authors also admire the Religious Right's efforts to be more inclusive, approvingly citing Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority embracing Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Mormons.

¹⁵ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 19.

Despite these virtues, Gerson and Wehner still criticize the Religious Right on several grounds. First, the Religious Right's language and tone "have often been apocalyptic, off-putting, and counter-productive." They cite Jerry Falwell as an example of being counter-productive for once claiming that liberals are doing to American evangelicals "what Nazi Germany did to the Jews." On this point, Gerson and Wehner wholeheartedly agree with Hunter's contention that conservatives generate a political culture of *ressentiment*. In their judgment, such "hysteria" might be good for funding-raising, but it is bad for American politics because it "makes a civil conversation impossible, and does a disservice to the cause of a Christian witness."¹⁶

Second, the Religious Right, Gerson and Wehner contend, "has been inconsistent and politically arbitrary." When the Christian Voice issued report cards in the 1980s on candidates' views on school prayer, abortion, support for a U.S. defense treaty with Taiwan, and opposition to a national Department of Education, they observed, there was no expression of interest concerning poverty or racial equality. "Such selectivity left a strong impression that the movement was less an independent voice than a tool of a specific political ideology." In the end, the movement was simply too partisan, as Carl F.H. Henry put it, "to formulate a persuasive public philosophy and to exhibit what it means to engage in politics Christianly."¹⁷

Finally, the "biggest problem" Gerson and Wehner discern in the Religious Right is theological. The Religious Right wrongly insists that America was founded as a Christian nation because it erroneously identifies America "with the nature and destiny of biblical Israel." Gerson and Wehner counter:

¹⁶ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 58.

¹⁷ Carl F.H. Henry, *No Longer Exiles: The Religious Right in American Politics*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), 76, quoted in Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 58.

America was not founded as a Christian nation—precisely *because* the founders were informed by a Jewish and Christian understanding of human nature. . . . At least where the federal government was concerned, the founders asserted that citizens should be subject to God and their conscience, not to the state. America was designed to be a nation where all faiths are welcomed, not one where one faith is favored. Historically, this disestablishment of religion has served the Christian faith well, preserving it from being corrupted and tainted by political power.¹⁸

Gerson and Wehner, therefore, dispute the Religious Right’s popular theological conviction that America was founded as a Christian nation on historical grounds. Although they do not probe very deeply how this mythic ideal of “Christian America” fuels the political psychology of the Religious Right, they clearly agree with Hunter on this point.

According to Gerson and Wehner, the Religious Right began as a defensive reaction to the modern world and ended up squandering its promise because it was simply too reactive. They write: “It responded to the liberal gospel by downplaying the very idea of social justice, thus narrowing the range of evangelical concern; the result was often a partial agenda, even a partisan one. In an unexpected way, this reactive model of social engagement allowed the left to continue setting the social and political agenda.”¹⁹ In short, the Religious Right rejected the very idea of *social good*.

Gerson and Wehner cite studies which suggest that an increasing number of evangelical Americans “want their brand of politics to be less partisan and bitter than in the past . . . as well as more high-minded and more firmly rooted in principles.” In this regard, Gerson and Wehner agree with Hunter’s assessment about the political tactics of conservatives. Instead of Hunter’s

¹⁸ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 59.

¹⁹ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 61.

“faithful presence,” they recommend a new kind of political action. One key principle that should inform Christian conservative thinking, the authors contend, is “an active and practical concern for human rights.” In fact, human rights are “among the most important elements of a Christian political theology.”²⁰ Consequently, the state should work actively to protect human rights at home and especially abroad.

To Gerson and Wehner, the state is not simply a necessary evil. The authors count themselves “conservatives in the tradition of Edmund Burke, who averred that God instated government as a means of human improvement.” So long as the state acts within its proper boundaries, they explain, “it has a positive and constructive role to play in human affairs.” The authors identify four proper roles that the government can play in the lives of its citizens. First, the state should promote order through the rule of law that respects its constitutional limits. Second, the state must promote justice. So, for instance, the state should protect the rights of the unborn and make abortion illegal. Third, the state should promote virtue. Gerson and Wehner, however, believe that the role of government in the formation of human character tends to be indirect and limited, especially compared with other government initiatives, like building roads. The state can nurture a civic order in which character-forming institutions, such as schools, churches, and voluntary associations, and especially families, can flourish. The authors have the temerity to cite the icon of evangelical-Republican alliance, Ronald Reagan, as an example of the negative impact the state can have upon the family. As governor of California in 1970, Reagan signed the nation’s first “no fault” divorce law, which produced “a revolution in social policy.” This law fundamentally changed the structure of legal divorce and helped lead to a profound decline in how Americans viewed marriage. As one policy analyst concluded, the “no fault” divorce law “led to a measureable increase in the divorce rate.” Finally, the state should promote

²⁰ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 70, 77.

prosperity. Gerson and Wehner affirm free market capitalism—but with qualifications. They contend that capitalism “is not a natural phenomenon; it is a social creation, a product of the state.” Consequently, the state has certain responsibilities to regulate the free market in a way, for example, that helps “cushion the blows of capitalism and to offer help to those who cannot help themselves.” They do not see any “magic formula” that can tell Christians what “the precise admixture should be between capitalism and the state.” These issues, Gerson and Wehner contend, “need to be determined through experience, through solutions tried and solutions failed, and with careful regard to facts and circumstances.”²¹

Gerson and Wehner’s understanding of the purpose and proper role of the state stands in sharp contrast to the political philosophy of the Religious Right. For example, the authors insist that “Scripture does not provide a governing blueprint.” While the New Testament gives detailed instruction on how to pray, how congregations should function, and how husbands and wives should treat each other, it “says almost nothing at all about what we would consider public policy.” Scripture does provide Christians with moral precepts “that ought to guide them in pursuing justice and peace, human dignity and the moral good,” but does not contain detailed guidance on trade, education, welfare, or affirmative action. These are issues to be determined by prudential reasoning. In order for Christian faith to influence important public policy decisions, Gerson and Wehner recommend that Christians engage in constructive persuasion. Unlike the Religious Right, which often invoked biblical proof-texts for public policies and demonized those with whom it disagreed, they encourage Christians to offer compelling reasons for political decisions based upon natural law. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. provide them

²¹ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 110, 104, 108.

with helpful examples, because both men appealed to “reason and the common good” and resisted the temptation to use the Scriptures “as a partisan club or political trump card.”²²

Gerson and Wehner have a very robust view of the importance of politics and the value of Christian political action. “Christians,” they write, “are useful in public life precisely because they recognize a wide world of eternal values and meaning beyond the political realm.”

Christians should “work for the good and health of this earthly city.” They, however, end their study with a brief but stern warning: To the Christian, politics has its limits. Drawing upon Augustine’s famous distinction between the City of Man and the City of God, they conclude that the “City of Man is our residence for now, and we care for its order and justice. The City of God is our home.”²³

Carl Trueman’s *Republocrat*: Evangelicals Are Easily Hoodwinked by the Religious Right

If *City of Man* criticizes the Religious Right for its divisive effect upon conservative Christian political engagement, Carl R. Trueman in *Republocrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative* offers a provocative critique of the Religious Right’s harmful influence upon the evangelical church in America. Trueman is a professor of historical theology and church history at one of the citadels of conservative evangelical theology, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is also a serious scholar with erudite works like *Luther’s Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525-1556*, published by Oxford University Press in 1994, to his credit.

While an evangelical insider theologically, Trueman is an outsider to American politics—he was born in Britain and educated at Cambridge and Aberdeen. As a young adult, Trueman says he was a Liberal Democrat, which is the party of the center or perhaps left center-left in British politics. In America, Trueman refuses to be categorized as either a Democrat or Republican but

²² Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 36-38, 121.

²³ Gerson and Wehner, *City of Man*, 136.

describes himself a “liberal conservative.” Whereas the *City of Man* models the kind of civil tone Gerson and Wehner aspire to see characterize conservative Christian political engagement, *Republocrat* is far more caustic and biting. At times, Trueman jeers at the Religious Right like a Member of Parliament during a debate in the House of Commons.

Trueman’s central thesis is that “conservative Christianity does not require conservative politics or conservative cultural agendas.” He asserts that the gospel “cannot and must not be identified with partisan political positions.” Although he has many unkind things to say about the political Left, Trueman focuses his attention upon the Religious Right because he sees this movement as a greater danger to the evangelical church. In his estimation, the close identification of conservative politics with Christian fidelity means that the evangelical church is “in danger of alienating a significant section of its people, particularly young people.”²⁴ Gerson and Wehner make the same point in their book. Trueman’s fears about the alienating impact that the Religious Right is having upon American youth is not unfounded. In their recent work, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, the sociologists, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell identify the Religious Right as one key cause fueling the rising rates of religious disaffection among American youth.²⁵

According to Trueman, the Religious Right holds strong opinions on a whole host of issues, ranging from gun control and defense spending to financial regulation and educational reform. But to Trueman, the problem is “whether there is a distinctly biblical position on these matters that can thus be pressed on the church, [and thus] is debatable.” He asks, “Is it Christian to support spending on arms that may be used in an unjust war? Or is it Christian to oppose arms

²⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *Republocrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), xix, xxv, xx.

²⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *See American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 120-33.

spending when this might leave the nation vulnerable to attack?” According to Trueman, “it is simply not the church’s job to parse political issues in this way. Certainly, anyone examining the great creedal and confessional statements of the church will draw a blank.” At the heart of the matter for Trueman is the doctrine of the church: “The creeds and confessions address the central truths of God and the gospel; and in restricting themselves to this content, they make a point about the church, that it is made up of those who hold to the truth of God’s salvation in Christ, not to this or that social policy or political philosophy.” Christian principles can inform ethical reflection on these matters, but at the level of law and public policy Christians can genuinely disagree with one another without necessarily being unbiblical. Whereas Gerson and Wehner express concern with how the Religious Right absolutizes certain laws and policies as the only biblically-responsible position to hold and how this attitude undermines constructive public debates, Trueman is troubled by the Religious Right’s impact upon the church’s witness. When the evangelical church takes strong political positions and engages in partisan politics, it excludes those who may believe the gospel but do not share the Religious Right’s political agenda. The more the evangelical church is identified with conservative politics, Trueman concludes, the more the church will drive away a generation of people concerned for the poor, the environment, and foreign-policy issues. Trueman counsels that Christians should be good citizens, should take their civic responsibilities seriously, and should agree to disagree on certain policy issues.²⁶

Trueman contends that evangelicals are often not very thoughtful about the relationship between Christianity and politics. He blames secularization, Fox News, an uncritical allegiance to free-market capitalism, and the superficial nature of American politics as the key sources behind this problem. For Trueman, the secularization of the church takes many forms. He cites

²⁶ Trueman, *Republocrat*, 107-109.

the health-and-wealth gospel of Joel Osteen as one example of a secular message draped in Christian language. Trueman also identifies another manifestation of secularization that might shock many evangelicals. By blurring the boundary between the church and the state and sometimes even between biblical history and America's history, he contends, that advocates of "Christian America" present an even more dangerous form of secularization inside the church than Osteen. Trueman points to *The Patriot's Bible* as a telling example of the kind of "uncritical nationalism" that identifies America as God's new Israel. In Trueman's opinion, "Biblical, salvation history is not repeated or recapitulated in the history of the USA or any other nation." To make such a claim, Trueman concludes, "is puerile, blasphemous nonsense" and "represents nothing other than the secularization of the gospel message to an idolatrous degree." It is rather ironic that Trueman considers Christian nationalism idolatrous because he teaches at Westminster Seminary whose president, Peter Lillback, is one of the leading advocates of Christian America. Nevertheless, Trueman insists that "the politics of nations and the destiny of God's people, the church, must never be identified."²⁷

Not only does secularization pose a danger to thoughtful Christian reflection, but the news media presents a threat as well. In Trueman's estimation, "radical conservative political commentary" undermines constructive discussion. He quotes several of Glenn Beck's arguments as evidence of the television personality's "drivel" and "concatenation of portentous-but-meaningless rhetoric." Trueman also quotes a couple of Bill O'Reilly's diatribes as evidence of the "no-spin zone" master's "nonsense." He even pauses to point out the irony that Rupert Murdoch's personal life is hardly "a paragon of Christian virtue," for Murdoch's London newspaper *The Sun* publishes pictures of topless women daily. *The Simpsons*, he adds, pillories

²⁷ Trueman, *Republicrat*, 32-33, 35. See Peter Lillback's *George Washington's Sacred Fire* (King of Prussia, PA: Providence Forum, 2006) and <http://www.providenceforum.org/>.

Christianity as a religion of half-witted idiots and sleazy clerics. For Trueman, however, Fox News stands out the major culprit in subverting the well-informed kind of political opinions that are obligatory for participating as good citizens in a democratic society.²⁸

While Trueman argues that some form of capitalism “is the best means of wealth creation,” he warns capitalism is not “an unmixed blessing.” On this point he shares some of the same concerns that Gerson and Wehner expressed. Trueman writes that there are some aspects of capitalism that should make Christians wary. First, capitalism can focus minds on economic prosperity in a way that is not biblical. Trueman also notes that consumerism can breed a sort of materialism that undermines biblical stewardship. Moreover, he disputes the libertarian notion about the “morality of the market” because, he argues, the market has no morality other than what is generated by the need to turn a profit. Without some kind of larger moral underpinning that stands prior to and independent of the values the market itself generates, a capitalist system will not be able to survive in the long-term.²⁹

Finally, Trueman complains that the media, and consequently political culture, thrive on shallow sound-bites instead of substantive discussions. He points to Sarah Palin’s reference to “death panels” as an example of “story trumping logic.” Her unsubstantiated story of the government deciding which old people live and die plays directly into the “overarching conservative narrative whereby the government can do no good at home and is an enemy of freedom (despite the fact that the Right generally regards it as the great agent of freedom when it operates abroad).”³⁰

Like Gerson and Wehner, Trueman concludes by calling evangelicals to realize “the limits of politics” and to earn “a reputation for thoughtful, informed, and measured political

²⁸ Trueman, *Republocrat*, 41-59.

²⁹ Trueman, *Republocrat*, 60-78.

³⁰ Trueman, *Republocrat*, 94-95.

involvement.” Instead of “tiresome clichés, character assassinations, and Manichaeian noise,” Christians need to debate with “intelligence and civility.” Anything less, Trueman thinks, will drive a generation away from the church.³¹

D.G. Hart’s *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals are not Truly Conservative*

D.G. Hart argues that in the thirty years since Ronald Reagan’s election, evangelicals “have not expanded their intellectual repertoire significantly beyond the moral imperatives of the Bible.”

While evangelicals vote consistently for the Republican Party, Hart contends that “their reasons for doing so are morally thick and politically thin.” As the subtitle of his most recent book, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism*, suggests, Hart insists that evangelicals “do not think or act like conservatives.”³² Hart’s thesis is as startling as it is straightforward: Evangelicals have betrayed the principles of American political conservatism.

Hart is intimately familiar with both evangelicalism and political conservatism. With degrees from Temple University, Westminster Seminary, Harvard, and a doctorate from Johns Hopkins University, Hart has labored his entire career at evangelical or conservative institutions. He has been the director of the Center for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, worked as the dean at Westminster Seminary in California, and served as the Director of the Partnered Projects, Academic Programs and Faculty Development at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Today, Hart is a professor of history at Hillsdale College. He is also an elder in the Orthodox

³¹ Trueman, *Republocrat*, 110.

³² D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 8-9.

Presbyterian Church. One would be hard pressed to find someone who has spent more time around evangelicals and conservatives.

To suggest that contemporary “born-again Protestants show no more capacity to think conservatively” than fundamentalists did during the halcyon days of Billy Graham’s popularity in the 1950s might strike one as rather iconoclastic and indeed it is. According to Hart’s analysis, conservatives and evangelicals simply have different values. Hart draws upon George H. Nash’s landmark history of modern American conservatism, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, to identify the origins of the political movement. Some conservatives, like Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk, sought to preserve important cultural conventions that had been handed down from previous generations, including the imaginative and spiritual capacity of the human person as reflected in the West’s literary and philosophical contribution. Other conservatives, such as Whittaker Chambers, were drawn to conservatism in reaction to the secular atheism of Communism. Libertarians, like Frederick A. Hayek, who feared the economic, political, and cultural consequences of socialism, represent a third strand to the movement. The leaders of the post-World War II revival of evangelicalism were bystanders to the arguments and institutions that came to define contemporary conservatism. Conservatives, such as Russell Kirk or William F. Buckley Jr., were deeply concerned about first-order political considerations involving legitimate authority, national sovereignty, freedom, the common good, civic virtue, and the best conditions for human flourishing. Nash notes that conservatives are most concerned with the structural problems of mass society.³³

According to Hart, evangelicals “have not learned to be wary of concentrations of power and wealth, [or to be] frustrated with mass society, and popular culture’s distraction from ‘permanent things,’ or [to be] skeptical about any humanitarian plan to end human misery.”

³³ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 10-11.

Evangelicals, therefore, are not true conservatives. “Instead, evangelicals are more likely to support political plans to improve society, grow the economy, and expand the United States’ global presence as long as doctors are not performing abortions and ministers are not presiding over the marriage of gay couples.”³⁴ The moral idealism of evangelicals may be at odds with political conservatism, Hart argues. Born-again Protestants might be conservatives if conservatism was only about public morality and virtue. Hart suggests that such moral idealism was really “alien” to American conservatism until the Reagan Revolution. “In fact, a moral idealism divorced from prior political or philosophical considerations leads inevitably to the kind of radicalism and social engineering that conservatives have historically opposed.”³⁵

Hart identifies five key reasons that show how evangelicals are different from conservatives. First, evangelical reverence for the Bible as divine revelation and the only reliable source of truth often leads to a view that sees the Bible as the ideal and sole source for all political reflection. The problem with “Bible-onlyism” is that it has “no standing within the legal and political institutions of a society,” Hart observes. But in a pluralistic democracy with no established church, laws and policies have to be based upon public reason. Quoting the Bible will do little to persuade people of other religions or no religion to adopt a particular position. Second, because evangelicals view the Bible as the sole source of truth, they have trouble differentiating the norms for one sphere of human existence from those for another. This perspective entails more than separating church and state on an institutional level. Conservatives value the separation of the state from social life so that politics does not dominate all areas of civil society, including the value of voluntary associations and private institutions. In contrast, the evangelical appeal to the Bible often springs from a desire to see Christ’s Lordship extended

³⁴ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 8.

³⁵ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 15-16.

over all areas of life. This attitude, however, can easily blur the distinctions between private and public life that characterize the conservative vision of a healthy society. Conservatives recognize that different norms must prevail in the various spheres of life that citizens inhabit. Families, jobs, churches, neighborhood associations, and political parties operate according to different standards. Third, the common evangelical conviction that America was allegedly founded as a “Christian nation” legitimizes political involvement. This attitude, however, violates “a basic axiom of twentieth-century conservative political theory: namely, *do not immanentize the eschaton.*” Fourth, many evangelicals hold views concerning salvation that hold out the possibility of living lives of sinless perfectionism. On a grand scale, Hart contends, this belief inspires a progressive optimism about the possibility of eradicating evil. By contrast, conservatism doubts the possibility of human perfectibility. The belief leads to suspicions about any effort to advance society through social programs, for instance, to relieve poverty. Finally, evangelical piety nurtures an anti-formalism that prefers the internal (heart and spirit) over the head (external and body). As a result, evangelicals, unlike conservatives, are not truly committed to the principles of federalism, republicanism, and constitutionalism.³⁶

Hart examines the political thought of a variety of evangelical political leaders in order to evaluate evangelicalism’s commitment, or lack thereof, to conservative principles. The study devotes chapters to the history of evangelical political involvement in the generation preceding the Reagan Revolution, to the renewal of evangelical political action in the 1980s, to the Religious Right, to faith-based social reform, to evangelical liberals, and to “heroic conservatism.” He analyzes the political theology of Mark Hatfield, Ron Sider, Richard Mouw, Chuck Colson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Pat Robertson, Marvin Olasky, and Jim Wallis

³⁶ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 192-99.

among others. By Hart’s evaluation, no evangelical leader—not even one—consistently adheres to genuinely conservative political principles.

Ralph Reed, one-time darling of the Religious Right, is a prominent example of a conservative poser. In his 1996 book, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics*, Reed attempts to justify the Christian Coalition and evangelical activism as political conservatism in action. According to Reed, the Coalition wanted lower taxes, less government, and tougher laws against crime and drugs to protect the family. Reed drew upon American history to vindicate political action. For instance, Reed applauds the Social Gospel as “a crusade for social justice within American Protestantism that merged traditional faith with radical political reform.”³⁷ He approvingly cites the theologically-progressive Walter Rauschenbusch’s efforts for organizing labor unions and for supporting anti-trust and minimum-wage laws as admirable examples of Christian political action. Hart notes, however, that evangelicals in Rauschenbusch’s day dismissed the Social Gospeller because he placed social reform on par with, if not above, evangelism as the primary task of the church. Equally troubling, by Hart’s evaluation, is Reed’s invocation of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Civil Rights movement as a valuable example of faith-based politics. Not only is Reed ignorant of or indifferent to King’s theological liberalism, Hart contends, he also has nothing to say of constitutional or legal matters surrounding King’s efforts to secure equal rights for African Americans. In short, Hart finds it simply “incredible” that Reed describes the Christian Coalition as conservative.³⁸

Michael Gerson is another faux-conservative by Hart’s estimation. Hart analyzes Gerson’s 2007 work, *Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America’s Ideals (And Why They Deserve to Fail If They Don’t)* as evidence of Gerson’s faulty understanding of

³⁷ Ralph Reed, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 41, quoted in Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 134.

³⁸ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 134-38.

true conservatism. Despite Gerson's affirmation of limited government, Gerson's commitment to a "radical belief in the rights of every individual" joined with a conviction that the state "must act, when appropriate, to secure those rights" abandons all sympathy for traditional conservatism.³⁹ According to Gerson, the national government as an institution is responsible to preserve human dignity and implement individual freedom both in the United States and throughout the world. In Hart's opinion, this flawed belief exposes Gerson's inability to grasp the tension between his own idealism and the realism that undergirds any position that qualifies as truly conservative. "Gerson's faith and moralism," Hart concludes, "could not find a resting place within the many rooms of the Right's intellectual mansion."⁴⁰

Hart reasons that outside of their commitment to preserving the family, evangelicals are not conservative because evangelicalism is a faith "that seeks the conversion of all people and expects a high degree of cultural and moral uniformity among followers of the true religion." The evangelical faith is not a means of "preserving the ways and customs of a particular people or community or region, but instead a vehicle for transforming society in ways remarkably similar to the changes that alarmed conservatives like Burke or Hume or Tocqueville."⁴¹

While evangelicals are not genuine conservatives, Hart suggests that if evangelicals repent, they might become conservatives. He ends with several recommendations that evangelicals might consider to ease the "painful transition from evangelical to conservative politics." First, evangelicals need to recognize that America's greatness primarily arises from its form of government that "begrudgingly created national structures" and left plenty of room for state and local governments. Its greatness does not arise from its religious identity. Second,

³⁹ Michael Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America's Ideals (And Why They Deserve to Fail If They Don't)* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 270, quoted in Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 181.

⁴⁰ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 184.

⁴¹ Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 214.

evangelicals need to realize that “liberty for all” entails the legal protection and legitimate status for all religious groups, including non-Christians. Third, evangelicals should acknowledge that political solutions will not solve the problems of culture and character formation. Hart challenges evangelicals to recognize that Christianity is about spiritual, not political, realities. Finally, Hart argues that Christians are called to be churchly pilgrims and not earnest crusaders. On this point, Hart shares a common conviction with the other Christian scholars under examination. Hart advocates that Christians need to recognize that Heaven is their ultimate home and view the American nation as only their proximate residence.⁴²

Conclusion

The evangelical intellectuals under examination offer rather different critical assessments of the evangelical-Republican alliance that has formed the heart of the Religious Right for nearly a generation. Hunter disputes the Religious Right’s overall objective. In his estimation, the Right’s movement operates on a fundamentally flawed understanding of how and why cultures change. Hunter’s prescription of a “faithful presence” represents neither Quietism nor a denigration of Christian participation in the democratic process. But he clearly stands apart from the others. Hart formally agrees with Hunter that the Religious Right’s political action is inappropriate. He criticizes the Religious Right, not because he finds it ineffective, but because he thinks the movement violates central conservative political principles that arise from a genuine commitment to federalism, republicanism, and constitutionalism. For the same reason, Hart explicitly disagrees with Gerson and Wehner’s vision of a conservative Christian political engagement.

⁴² Hart, *Billy Graham to Sarah Palin*, 216.

Despite important disagreements, these evangelical intellectuals share four significant criticisms of the Religious Right. All these authors are troubled by the Religious Right's use of half-truths and histrionics as a political tactic because they subvert constructive discussions in the public square. The apocalyptic rhetorical posturing of the Religious Right that construes every political issue a life-and-death contest between the forces of good and evil makes civil discussions simply impossible.

Second, the Religious Right's conviction that America was really founded as a "Christian nation" obfuscates more than it clarifies Christianity's important role in the founding period of the country.⁴³ Furthermore, this popular belief functions as a rallying cry to mobilize Christians politically. All the evangelical intellectuals seem to agree that viewing America as a Christian nation generates *ressentiment*, as Hunter describes it, along with a sense of entitlement that fuels majoritarianism.⁴⁴

Third, Gerson and Wehner as well as Trueman and Hart are especially critical of the Religious Right's employment of the Bible as a guide for public policy. Although they approach this point differently, they agree that only referencing the Bible is not a legitimate source for laws and public policies. As numerous observers have noted, American politics has to be, instead, based upon public reason. Consequently, invoking Bible verses as the sole warrant for a law or public policy is insufficient. Christians must present a warrant that can appeal to a wider range of citizens than just Christians who share their veneration of the Scriptures. Gerson and Wehner recommend that Christians must find specific grounds for laws and policies that arise out of natural law. Trueman contends that many specific policy issues are simply not addressed

⁴³ For two scholarly introductions to this topic, see John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010 and Thomas S. Kidd's recent study, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic, 2010).

⁴⁴ On the dangers of majoritarianism, see John Seel, "Nostalgia for the Lost Empire," in *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, eds. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 63-80.

in Scripture, and therefore, give Christians wide latitude for devising reasons for particular laws and policies.⁴⁵ Hart, by contrast, recommends that Christians derive their politics solely from political principles.

Finally, Gerson, Wehner, Trueman and Hart turn back to the classical Augustinian distinction between the City of God and the City of Man. While the authors disagree on the appropriateness of Christian political action, they agree that the Religious Right has so heightened the importance of politics among American Christians, that it has diminished their understanding of politics' temporary character. The Religious Right has made the City of Man of paramount importance. At least for evangelical intellectuals, the City of God is ultimately more important because it concerns things of eternal significance.

With the death of several key leaders of the movement as well as the retirement of others, the Religious Right is certainly in a period of transition. The fact that evangelical intellectuals are now publicly voicing criticisms of the Religious Right might indicate that the movement is entering a period of critical self-reflection and this may bode well for its long-term growth and maturation. Or it might indicate that the movement is losing attraction among thoughtful evangelical conservatives. If it is the latter, then the evangelical-Republican marriage was really just one of convenience.

⁴⁵ Since he is Reformed in his theology, he would presumably agree with Gerson and Wehner on this point. He would likely use, however, the terms "common grace" and "general revelation" instead of natural law. Hart may as well agree that theologically his conservative political principles arise out of God's common grace.