

PREFACE

Human experience proves that politics profoundly impacts billions of people. Bad political choices lead to dictatorship, starvation, and death for hundreds of millions. Good political decisions nurture freedom, life, justice, and peace. Politics matters.

Christian faith teaches that all authority on heaven and earth has already been given to the risen Lord Jesus. He is now King of kings and Lord of lords. Christians, therefore, must act politically in ways that are faithful to Christ the Lord.

Tragically, Christian political activity today is a disaster. Christians embrace contradictory positions on almost every political issue. When they join the political fray, they often succumb to dishonesty and corruption. Even when they endorse good goals, they too often promote their political agenda in foolish ways that frighten non-Christians, thus making it more difficult or nearly impossible to achieve important political goals.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that many Christians, especially evangelical Christians, have not thought very carefully about how to do politics in a wise, biblically grounded way. This book seeks to develop an approach, a methodology, for doing that. It attempts to show how to integrate a thoroughly biblical normative vision with a careful study of society in a way that develops a conceptual framework—a political philosophy—that can guide Christians into more thoughtful and effective political activity.

Both because I am an evangelical and because evangelicals have done less work than other Christians on this topic, this book is addressed primarily to evangelicals and Pentecostals. I pray, however, that growing evangelical reflection on political engagement will lead to more dialogue and greater cooperation among all branches of historic Christianity in the important task of shaping political life.

PART I

THE SCANDAL
OF EVANGELICAL
POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT

For thirty years, evangelicals around the world have been rushing into politics. Occasionally, we have been wise and effective. More often, we have floundered and failed. Too frequently, our political activity has hindered our evangelistic witness and disgraced our Lord. We must face what we have done wrong so that we can do better.

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TRAGIC FAILURE, NEW OPPORTUNITY

Evangelicals today are up to our ears in politics. After decades of withdrawal, we are now vigorously engaged in political activity all around the world. The opportunities are enormous. But the lack of thoughtful preparation is creating tragic failure.

The evangelical return to politics in the last three decades has been strikingly rapid. As late as 1965, Jerry Falwell sharply condemned the clergy engaged in civil rights marches and issued a sweeping rejection of politics.

Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ and begin doing anything else—including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reforms. . . . Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners. . . . Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. The gospel does not clean up the outside but rather regenerates the inside.¹

Just fifteen years later, Rev. Falwell's name was everywhere in public debate as the leader of a new "Religious Right" political movement

called Moral Majority, widely credited with helping elect Ronald Reagan as president of the United States in 1980.

Many fundamentalists and other theologically conservative leaders followed Falwell into vigorous political activity, urging their followers to register, vote, and lobby their representatives. Prominent fundamentalist author and pastor Tim LaHaye went so far as to declare that “the only way to have a genuine spiritual revival is to have legislative reform.”² What an incredible reversal of the earlier, standard evangelical view that evangelism and spiritual revival, *not* political reform, are the way to change society.

In the decade before Moral Majority burst on the scene, a number of younger evangelicals had called for evangelicals to reengage in political life.³ Many of the specifics in Falwell’s Moral Majority were not exactly what we had in mind! But there is no doubt that Falwell’s Moral Majority and then the Christian Coalition organized by charismatic TV preacher Pat Robertson drew millions of formerly disengaged evangelicals (especially fundamentalists and charismatics) into the political arena.

During this same time, evangelicals in Latin America and Asia also joined the political fray in dramatic new ways. There have been at least eight evangelical presidents in developing countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Among the best known are Obasanjo in Nigeria, Chiluba in Zambia, Ramos in the Philippines, Kim Young Sam in South Korea, and Ríos Montt in Guatemala. In Spanish-speaking Latin America alone, well over twenty evangelical political parties have emerged.⁴

In a recent book by Brazilian evangelical scholar Paul Freston, the author surveys and analyzes this sweeping new evangelical political engagement in the Third World. His conclusion? In spite of important positive developments, Freston found widespread confusion, ineptitude, misguided policies, and considerable corruption. Brazil experienced a flood of new evangelical (especially Pentecostal) political activity after 1986, but vote selling and outright corruption “have characterized Protestant politics since 1986.”⁵ Lacking any carefully developed Christian political philosophy to guide his politics, one evangelical politician announced the principle that “everything that is praised in the Bible should be prescribed [i.e., enacted as public law], everything that is condemned should be proscribed [i.e., prohibited by law].”⁶

Frederick Chiluba, widely known as an evangelical Christian, was elected president of Zambia in 1991. He appointed several evangelical

pastors to his cabinet and pronounced Zambia a “Christian nation.” When he issued this declaration, Chiluba announced: “I submit the Government and the entire nation of Zambia to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I further declare that Zambia is a Christian nation that will seek to be governed by the righteous principles of the Word of God.”⁷ (Chiluba’s statement reminds one of the decades-long attempt by some American evangelicals to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution declaring that Jesus Christ is Lord.)⁸

Unfortunately, Chiluba violated human rights, tortured opponents in custody, bought votes, and allowed widespread corruption so he could run for a third term. He even used tear gas on groups who opposed him. Eventually, more than half of Zambia’s members of parliament voted to impeach Chiluba.⁹

Freston blames many of these and other failures on a lack of systematic evangelical reflection on the nature of political engagement.¹⁰ “A community that goes from apoliticism to political involvement without teaching on biblical political ethics will be susceptible to the prevailing political culture.”¹¹

Ralph Reed, the brilliant strategist who led Robertson’s Christian Coalition for many years, provides a striking illustration. In his book *Active Faith*, Reed reflects on what changed when he became a committed Christian and began attending an evangelical church: “My religious beliefs never changed my views on the [political] issues to any degree because my political philosophy was already well developed.”¹² If one assumes that a biblically informed and balanced political agenda was identical with the conservative platform of the Republican Party in the 1990s, then one can understand why Reed’s new evangelical faith did not change any of his politics. But if that was not the case, then Reed offers a classical example of how Christians often uncritically embrace inherited political perspectives of right (or left) without reflecting in a systematic, biblical way on what should be a uniquely Christian political agenda.

Ed Dobson, Falwell’s vice president in the early years of the Moral Majority, has subsequently lamented the movement’s lack of a coherent, developed political philosophy. Their approach, he says, was “ready, fire, aim.”¹³ Their lack of careful reflection, Dobson now believes, contributed to many failures: thinking America had a “favored-nation status with God,” neglecting what the Bible teaches about the poor, unfairly attacking enemies, and using manipulative fund-raising techniques.¹⁴

Many thoughtful commentators—both evangelical insiders and friendly outsiders—agree with Dobson’s lament about the failure of evangelicals to develop a comprehensive political philosophy. Michael Cromartie, who has spent years in Washington nurturing evangelical political reflection, notes that evangelicals have “become involved in politics for cultural reasons without seeking theological justification for that involvement until after the fact.”¹⁵ In a letter inviting evangelical leaders to a Washington gathering in early 1997 to discuss Christian faith and public life, Don Eberly pointed to “the absence of an evangelical theology.” In fact, Eberly suggested that the lack of a solid political philosophy had led evangelicals to use language in their political work that prompted non-evangelicals to view them as “intolerant,” dangerous people with theocratic designs. Eberly concluded that unless evangelicals developed an “orthodox public theology,” they would soon revert back to a separationist mentality and a new withdrawal from politics.¹⁶

Prominent evangelical Republican politician Paul Henry lamented as early as 1977 that “the evangelical community . . . seeks to leap from piety to practice with little reflection on guiding principles.”¹⁷

Evangelical historian Mark Noll has written several important pieces analyzing evangelical political engagement throughout American history. That engagement was vigorous up until the early twentieth century when evangelicals reacted one-sidedly against the liberal theology of the Social Gospel movement and retreated into separatist, fundamentalist enclaves. But even earlier when evangelicals were politically engaged, Noll argues, they did very little theological reflection on their politics. Grounded in an emotional fervor that characterized the revivalism that so powerfully shaped evangelicals, their political activity was populist, based on intuition and simplistic biblical proof texting rather than systematic reflection.

The situation grew even worse as premillennial dispensationalism, preoccupied with the details of the last times surrounding Christ’s return, swept through many evangelical circles in the first half of the twentieth century. Apocalyptic speculation about whether Mussolini, Hitler, or Stalin might be the Antichrist reached fever pitch in the 1930s and 1940s as evangelical political engagement plunged to an all-time low. Even as biblical a leader as Donald Barnhouse, famous Philadelphia pastor, editor, and radio preacher, declared that Christians who study the details of the end times in Ezekiel knew more about current political developments than those who read the best

secular newsmagazines.¹⁸ At a time when end-times novels are by far the most widely read evangelical books, we need to hear Noll's warning that if evangelicals continue to be influenced by the kind of historicist dispensationalism that tries to identify current events as the detailed fulfillment of biblical prophecy, "there is little intellectual hope for the future" of responsible evangelical political reflection.¹⁹

According to Os Guinness, there has been "no serious evangelical public philosophy in this [the twentieth] century."²⁰ Not quite that negative, Noll has detected signs of renewed evangelical political reflection in several evangelical traditions, especially among Dutch Reformed, theonomist, and Anabaptist thinkers.²¹ Unfortunately, he concludes, "Their diverse approaches to the Bible leave evangelical political thought scattered all over the map."²²

Evangelical failure to develop a comprehensive political philosophy contrasts sharply with what other Christian traditions, especially Catholics, have done. Roman Catholics benefit from over a century of papal encyclicals that have carefully developed and articulated a Catholic approach to public life.²³ Mainline Protestants—both through church declarations and the work of brilliant individuals like Reinhold Niebuhr—have also developed a substantial collection of careful thought on politics.²⁴ The evangelical community has simply failed to develop anything comparable.²⁵

The absence of any widely accepted, systematic evangelical reflection on politics leads to contradiction, confusion, ineffectiveness, even biblical unfaithfulness, in our political work.

Consider the inconsistency with regard to the sanctity of human life. Almost all evangelicals agree with the principle. But many highly visible evangelical pro-life movements focus largely on the question of abortion—as if, as one wag commented, life begins at conception and ends at birth. But what about the millions of children who die every year of starvation or the millions of adults killed annually by tobacco smoke? Are those not also sanctity-of-life issues?

Senator Jesse Helms provides one of the most stunning illustrations of this problem. For many years Senator Helms was one of the most prominent pro-life leaders in the U.S. Congress, pushing for restrictions on abortion. But Helms happened to represent the largest tobacco-growing state in the country. So he also supported government subsidies for tobacco growers—even using tax dollars to subsidize shipping American tobacco to poor nations under our Food for Peace program! Hardly a pro-life use of public tax dollars.

Most evangelicals believe that widespread moral decay threatens our future. Some evangelicals argue that restoring public Bible reading and prayer at the beginning of the school day in the public schools would help reverse the moral decay. Other evangelicals believe that would violate the constitutional separation of church and state.

Evangelicals have disagreed sharply on the faith-based initiatives of President George W. Bush and the earlier legislation on Charitable Choice signed by President Clinton. These new measures allow deeply faith-based organizations to receive federal funds to expand their social programs serving the poor and needy without having to abandon the religious character of their programs. Many evangelicals enthusiastically support these measures as a reversal of several decades of radically secularized misinterpretation of the First Amendment on religious freedom. Other evangelicals argue that the faith-based initiatives, especially Charitable Choice, violate the First Amendment and threaten to destroy both church and state.

Evangelical pronouncements on the role of government are often contradictory. Sometimes when attacking government measures they dislike, evangelical voices use libertarian arguments that forbid almost all government programs to help the poor. ("Helping the poor is a task for individuals and churches, not the government. Government should provide a legal framework, fair courts, and police protection but then leave almost everything else to the free choice of individuals.") But when the issue changes from the poor to the family, the definition of marriage, abortion, or pornography, the same people quickly abandon libertarian arguments that maximize individual freedom. Instead they push vigorously for legislation that involves substantial government restriction of individual choices. It is possible that there are valid intellectual arguments for adopting libertarian arguments in the first case and nonlibertarian arguments in the second. But a careful argument would have to be made. Without such argument, flipping from libertarian to nonlibertarian arguments looks confused and superficial.

Or consider the agenda of many Christian political movements. One sees a great deal on abortion, euthanasia, and the family. But hardly ever do they push for public policy to combat racism, protect the creation, or empower the poor. If it is the case (we will explore this further in subsequent chapters) that the Bible says that God cares *both* about the family *and* the poor, *both* about the sanctity of human life *and* racial justice *and* creation, then should not evangelical political

movements be promoting all these things? Does not a one-sided focus on just the issues that happen to be the favored ones of either the left or the right suggest that one's political agenda is shaped more by secular ideology than careful biblical, theological reflection?

Or consider the tough question: What should we legislate? Should public law, as the newly engaged evangelical politician we quoted earlier said, support everything the Bible says is right and outlaw everything the Bible says is wrong? Should public law allow divorce only in the narrow circumstances under which Jesus permitted divorce?²⁶ Or should the state's law on divorce differ from the church's teaching? If one believes that adultery and homosexual practice are sinful, does that mean that the law should make such activity a crime? If not, why not? Answering the complex question of what to legislate and what not to legislate requires a lot of thinking about the proper, limited role of the state, the nature of human freedom, and the purpose and limitations of laws. In short, it requires sophisticated thinking about a biblically grounded, factually informed political philosophy.

All that may sound so complicated that some conclude, "Forget it. We don't need all that highfalutin intellectual stuff." But those who take that route are doomed to continue the present pattern of political engagement full of contradiction, confusion, ineffectiveness, and failure. At least as bad, they are likely to despair of achieving anything significant through politics and drop out. (That's basically what Falwell's two former vice presidents, Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, recommend in their book *Blinded by Might*.)²⁷

Would that be so bad? After all, politics is certainly not the most important activity in the world. It is not as important as evangelism. Being good parents, church members, neighbors, school teachers—none of these things are politics, but they are enormously important and help build good societies.

So should faithful Christians just forget about politics? No, for two reasons—one practical, the other theological.

It is a simple historical fact that political decisions have a huge impact—for good or bad—on the lives of literally billions of people. Think of the devastation and death the world might have avoided if German voters had not elected Hitler to public office. Think of the freedom, goodness, and joy that followed for tens of millions from the fact that evangelical member of Parliament William Wilberforce labored for more than thirty years and eventually persuaded his col-

leagues in the British parliament to outlaw first the slave trade and then slavery itself in the British Empire.

It is through politics that country after country has come to enjoy democracy. It is through politics that nation after nation has stopped jailing and killing “heretics”—thousands of my ancestors in the sixteenth century were burned at the stake or drowned in the rivers by fellow Protestants who disagreed with our belief that the church should be separate from the state. It took centuries, but eventually more and more politicians in more and more countries decided that religious freedom for everyone is a necessary mark of a just political order. It is through politics that Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism first conquered and developed and then waned and disappeared in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It is through politics that we develop laws that either restrict or permit abortion, allow or forbid “gay marriage,” protect or destroy the environment. Politics is simply too important to ignore.

The theological reason for political engagement is even more compelling. The central Christian confession is that Jesus is now Lord—Lord of the entire universe. The New Testament explicitly teaches that he is now “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). “All authority in heaven and on earth” *has been* given to the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:18). Christians who know that must submit every corner of their lives to their wonderful Lord.

Since we live in democratic societies where we have the freedom to vote, our votes—or even our failure to vote—shape what happens in important areas of politics. If Christ is my Lord, if Christ desires the well-being of all, and if my vote has the potential to encourage political decisions that will promote the well-being of my neighbors, then the obligation to vote responsibly follows necessarily from my confession that Christ my Lord calls me to love my neighbor. One way Christians must live out our belief that Christ is Lord, even of political life, is to think and pray for wisdom to act politically in ways that best reflect Christ our Lord.

That is the basic task of this book. How do we acquire the wisdom to act in politics in a way that truly reflects Christ? How do we move from a commitment to Jesus Christ and biblical authority to concrete political decisions that lead us to support or oppose specific laws and candidates? Is there an approach, a method, a framework that will help us do that? I hope the following chapters succeed in articulating an evangelical political philosophy that will do just that.

Some may ask: Why call it an *evangelical* political philosophy? My friends David Gushee and Dennis Hollinger have recently argued that what we call evangelicalism is really a series of revival movements designated to call Christians who are straying from historic Christianity back to orthodox Christian faith and practice. Therefore there is really no such thing as evangelicalism per se or an evangelical ethics, or an evangelical political philosophy. There are simply a number of orthodox Christian political philosophies articulated by persons who stand within one of the several orthodox Christian theological traditions (whether Lutheran, Reformed, Pentecostal, Anabaptist, Wesleyan, Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholic).²⁸

We need not decide whether their basic thesis is valid in order to note one problem: their argument obscures the fact that there are approximately 500 million Christians living in virtually every country on the planet whose leaders identify in some important ways with the label “evangelical.” They know they are Protestants, not Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox. Many of them also see themselves as Pentecostals, or Wesleyans, or Anabaptists, or Reformed, or Anglicans. But most (although not all) also see themselves as part of the broad family that identifies with the label of “evangelical Protestant.” This family shares a common passion to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with those who have never heard, to submit their whole life to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and to embrace the Bible as God’s authoritative revealed word and final authority for faith and practice.

In spite of the many specifics of their theological traditions that still divide them, they sense that all those who identify with the label “evangelical” have important things in common that enable them to work together in political life to move their societies toward wholeness. As we have seen, their first steps in the past couple decades have often been confused and imperfect. But evangelicals are ready to try again. All around the world, evangelical thinkers and politicians are wrestling at a deeper level with how to act politically in faithfulness to Christ.²⁹ If even a modest fraction of that rapidly growing number of 500 million evangelicals and Pentecostals would develop a commonly embraced, biblically grounded framework for doing politics, they would change the world.