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Developing an Evangelical Political Framework: Moving Toward Consensus

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EVANGELICALS TODAY are up to their 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. 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 Rios Montt in Guatemala. In Spanish speaking Latin America alone, well over twenty evangelical political parties have emerged.¹

I The Problem

In a recent book by Cambridge University Press, Brazilian evangelical scholar, Paul Freston, surveys and analyses this sweeping new evangelical political engagement in the developing 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

¹ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 285.

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politics since 1986'.² 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 [prohibited by law]'.³

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.'⁴ Unfortunately, Chiluba violated human rights, tortured opponents in custody, bought votes and allowed widespread corruption so that 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.⁵

Freston blames many of these and other failures on a lack of systematic evangelical reflection on the nature of political engagement.⁶ 'A community that goes from apoliticism to political involvement without teaching on biblical political ethics will be susceptible to the prevailing political culture.'⁷

Ralph Reed, the brilliant strategist who led Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition in the United States for many years, provides a striking illustration. In his book, *Active Faith*, Reed reflected 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.'⁸ 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,

2 Paul Freston, 'Evangelicals and Politics in the Third World', in David P. Gushee, ed., *Christians and Politics: Beyond the Culture Wars* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 109.

3 Quoted in Freston, 'Evangelicals and Politics in the Third World', p. 126.

4 Quoted in Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'President Frederick Chiluba and Zambia' in a forthcoming book, ed. Terence O. Ranger, *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*.

5 See Phiri's lengthy chapter (see n. 2) and Freston, 'Evangelicals and Politics in the Third World', pp. 115-120.

6 Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics*, p. 315.

7 Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics*, p. 126.

8 Ralph Reed, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 23.

developed political philosophy. Their approach, he says, was 'ready, fire, aim'.⁹ 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 fundraising techniques.¹⁰

Evangelical historian Mark Noll has written several important pieces, analysing 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 fervour 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

Anti-Christ 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 know more about current political developments than those who read the best secular news magazines.¹¹ 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.¹²

Evangelical failure to develop a systematic comprehensive political philosophy contrasts sharply with what other Christian traditions, especially Catholics have done. Roman Catholics benefit from over a century of papal encyclicals which have carefully developed and articulated a Catholic approach to public life.¹³ Mainline Protestants—both through church

9 Personal correspondence with Ed Dobson.

10 Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 105, 165.

11 Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 166.

12 Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, p. 173.

13 See especially Kenneth R. Himes, et al., eds., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005) and Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004).

declarations and the work of brilliant individuals like Reinhold Niebuhr—have also developed a substantial collection of careful thought on politics.¹⁴ The evangelical community has simply failed to develop anything comparable.¹⁵

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 have focused 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?

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, and 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 non-libertarian arguments in the second. But a careful argument would have to be made. Without such argument, flipping from libertarian to non-libertarian 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 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 favoured 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 pub-

¹⁴ See especially books by Emil Brunner, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Charles Kegley, Paul Lehmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Max L. Stackhouse, William Temple, Ronald Thiemann and Philip Wogaman, among others.

¹⁵ A partial exception to this generalization is provided by the books on Abraham Kuyper and recent authors inspired by Kuyper (especially James Skillen) and the Reformed thinkers shaped by Calvin College (e.g. Richard Mouw and Stephen Monsma) as well as the writings of John Howard Yoder.

lic 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?¹⁶ Or should the state's law on divorce differ from what the church teaches? 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.

II Why Politics?

All that may sound so complicated that some conclude: 'Forget it. We don't need all that "high fallutin intellectual stuff."' 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, neighbours, 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.

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 (Mt. 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

16 Matthew 19:8-9.

all, and if my vote has the potential to encourage political decisions that will promote the well-being of my neighbours, then the obligation to vote responsibly follows necessarily from my confession that Christ my Lord calls me to love my neighbour. 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.

The failures of recent evangelical political engagement flow to a significant degree from the fact that we failed to develop a biblically-grounded, systematic approach to the complicated task of politics. We failed to do our homework before we took the test. We need more careful attention to developing a wise methodology for engaging in politics.

Our basic goals are fairly clear. As Christians we want to wholeheartedly submit our politics to the Lordship of Christ. We want to be uncompromisingly biblical. We also want to be grounded in 'the facts'—in an honest, accurate reading of history and the social sciences. Finally, we want a comprehensive framework that helps us make consistent, faithful, effective political decisions about very concrete questions: Should I oppose or support this law? Should I vote for this or that candidate for Congress or the Presidency?

III The Starting Point

There is another huge problem. Even if a broad range of evangelicals could agree on major aspects of a biblically informed political philosophy, they would still face the tough reality that

modern society is highly pluralistic. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and especially the secular intellectuals who dominate our great universities have little or no interest in political ideas offered by Christians as 'biblical truths' for shaping politics. Radically divergent, mutually contradictory views about almost any topic relevant to politics exist in contemporary society.

In two widely influential books, *After Virtue* (1985) and *Whose Justice?* (1988), Alasdair MacIntyre has concluded that it is impossible to develop a set of common values that all can endorse as the foundation of social order by starting with some allegedly neutral, objective philosophical starting point. No such place exists. We are simply left with competing values rooted in competing religious and philosophical traditions.

Before we accept this conclusion, we need to review two of the most significant twentieth century attempts to find a neutral, objective, starting point for discovering common values that all citizens can embrace: natural law and the political philosophy of John Rawls.

The natural law tradition, articulated so clearly by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, developed by Catholics over many centuries, and promoted brilliantly by twentieth century Catholics like John Courtney Murray claims that simply on the basis of reason which all persons share, it is possible to discern universal moral values adequate for building a good society. This approach is highly attractive.¹⁷

¹⁷ Some evangelicals are attracted to this position. See Paul Henry in Koopman, ed., *The*

Many objections, however, have been raised to natural law theory. Natural law theorists have defended both monarchy and democracy, both state enforcement of religious orthodoxy and the separation of church and state. Prominent philosophers including David Hume and Immanuel Kant have mounted powerful objections.¹⁸ Many Protestants have argued that since the fall, sin has distorted not just the will but human reason to such an extent that it is impossible for sinful persons to discern moral truth with unaided human reason. We need special divine revelation which we have in the Bible.¹⁹

Biblical Christians, however, cannot totally dismiss the idea of natural law because the New Testament clearly affirms it. It is certainly true that sin has distorted our minds as well as our wills (Rom. 1:21, 28). But Paul insists that even Gentile sinners who do not know of God's special revelation through Israel nevertheless have some moral insight (Rom. 2: 14-15). This limited moral insight is not sufficient

for salvation. But Paul does clearly insist that some fundamental awareness of right and wrong is embedded in every human being.

Unfortunately, human sin is so powerful that, to a great extent, it obscures and conceals this moral insight. That means that our only certain guide to ethics is God's special revelation in the Bible. Only the gospel has the power to overcome sinful humanity's perverse desire to deny the ethical truth that at some level it still partially understands. But the fact that no living person, however sinful, can fully obscure this moral insight written on the heart is enormously important when we try to appeal to non-Christians and urge them to accept moral claims that Christians understand clearly only on the basis of biblical revelation.²⁰

What does this mean for a Christian political philosophy? It means that we should turn primarily to the Bible, not to unaided human reason, for a clear understanding of morality, the nature of persons, justice, family, etc. Our normative framework, our fundamental normative principles for politics, properly come largely from the Bible, not mere philosophical reflection. It also means that careful systematic reflection on politics within the Christian community must be where we begin. We need structures and processes among Christians to think through both a uniquely Christian framework for politics and also the concrete implications of that framework. But when we seek to make a case in the larger, pluralistic

Thought of Paul B. Henry, p. 86; David L. Weeks, 'The Uneasy Politics of Modern Evangelicalism', *Christian Scholars Review*, XXX, 4 (summer 2001), pp. 403-418; and, carefully, J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997). For a classic Catholic example, see John A. Ryan, *Economic Justice*, ed. Harlan R. Beckley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), p. xix.

¹⁸ See Weeks' helpful summary of major objections (and a critique of the objections), 'Uneasy Politics of Modern Evangelicalism', pp. 412-415.

¹⁹ Emil Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, trans. Mary Hottinger (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), p. 91, and Carl Henry cited in nn. 41, 42 of Weeks' 'Uneasy Politics'.

²⁰ See the helpful comments by Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart*, pp. 179-186.

society for political proposals (eg. that abortion is the taking of innocent human life, that marriage is only between a man and a woman or that justice demands a special concern for the poor) we know that at some deep level even secular thinkers who reject these claims actually have these truths written on their hearts, even though they deny it. And it also means that we may be able, at times, to develop common language that most if not all citizens will embrace. That means that although natural law will not work to overcome the impasse we noted earlier, it is, nonetheless, very important.

What about John Rawls? Does his political philosophy offer access to the basic principles needed for a fair, democratic society without any prior acceptance of the specific moral judgments that are so much disputed in our pluralistic society? That is what he claimed in his famous book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)—probably the single most influential secular book on political philosophy in the last three decades of the twentieth century.²¹

Many critics, including Michael Sandel, however, have rejected Rawls' claim to a neutral, objective starting point.²² Sandel argued that Rawls'

approach assumed a particular (and wrong) view of persons as isolated, abstract individuals unattached to any community.²³ In later writings, (eg. *Political Liberation*, 1993) Rawls himself admitted that every person operates with some view of the good grounded in a religious or philosophical system and Rawls has abandoned the search for a purely objective starting point. Thus the work and debate about John Rawls confirms the fact that contemporary society is so fundamentally pluralistic that it is impossible to find some neutral, objective starting point for political thought.²⁴

How then should biblical Christians proceed? We must start by accepting the fact of pluralism. That does not mean embracing relativism and abandoning Christian truth claims. John Courtney Murray once noted that he did not like pluralism (he wished everyone would accept the truth) but he accepted it as a reality. Christians can and should believe and claim that Jesus Christ and biblical revelation represent the truth that all people should embrace even as we respect the vast variety of people in our pluralistic society who disagree with us.

That means that Christians should start with biblical revelation and work within the Christian community to develop a framework for political

21 For this overview and critique of Rawls, see Paul A. Brink, 'Selves in Relation: Theories of Community and the Imago Dei Doctrine' in Thomas W. Heilke and Ashley Woodiwiss, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science: Christian Scholars Engage Their Discipline* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2001), pp. 85-123.

22 See the lengthy discussion in Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 331-47.

23 Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

24 See Ashley Woodiwiss, 'Rawls, Religion, and Liberalism', chapter 3 in Heilke and Woodiwiss, *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science*, and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 380.

engagement that is thoroughly grounded both in a biblical worldview and in systematic analysis of society. Applying this framework, we then encourage individual Christians as well as groups and associations of Christians to decide how to apply that framework to specific proposed laws and actual candidates for office.

At that point, a crucial question of language and translation emerges. 'The Bible says' is not the most effective way to persuade non-Christians—whether Jews, Muslims, or 'secular humanists'—to adopt our specific proposals. We must be ready to search for language and arguments that others can understand. As we do that, we remember that there is a basic natural law that is still written on the hearts of all our neighbours. Therefore we will not despair of the possibility of frequently persuading a majority of our neighbours that our proposals (grounded in a biblical worldview about persons, justice, etc) offer a wise way forward. At the same time, knowing the depth of human sin, we will also expect our fellow citizens frequently to reject good proposals.

Precisely because of our own principles, however, especially our respect for human freedom and our recognition of the reality of widespread pluralism, we will distinguish between what biblical norms should be legislated and what should not. We will also refuse to seek to impose our good legislative proposals on society until a majority in our democratic society freely embrace our proposals. Because we respect the freedom and dignity of every person, we will nurture not a naked public square free of all religious reasons for political proposals, but rather an open,

pluralistic, civil, public square open to all the different religiously and philosophically grounded arguments and proposals that every citizen and every particular community wish to advance.²⁵ Thus, 'the separation of church and state' will not mean the exclusion of religious language and arguments from public, political debate. We will listen carefully to every view even as we argue that proposals shaped by unbiblical worldviews are wrong and destructive.

IV Toward a Faithful Methodology

1. Four Components of Every Political Decision.

Every careful political decision requires four different, interrelated components: (a) a normative framework; (b) a broad study of society and

²⁵ My argument is parallel to that of James W. Skillen in *Recharging the American Experiment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); see for example, pp. 122-123. My proposal rejects any suggestion that public theology must use only arguments that are independent of a particular faith (see for example, David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, [New York: Crossroad, 1981]). See also Ronald Thiemann's helpful critique of Tracy, *Constructing a Public Theology*, pp. 20-21. Ashley Woodiwiss makes a proposal similar to mine in calling for a Christian political approach in which Christians first define the Christian community's identity and interests and then negotiate with other communities in our multi-cultural, pluralistic society. 'Deliberation or Agony? Toward a Post-Liberal Christian Democratic Theory', chapter 6 in Heilke and Woodiwiss, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of Political Science*.

the world; (c) a political philosophy; and (d) detailed social analysis on specific issues.

a) Normative Framework

Virtually every political decision of any significance is grounded in fundamental beliefs about morality and the nature of persons. Many people do not think consciously about this normative framework. Some pretend that it does not exist. But in fact, it is simply impossible to make political decisions without some religiously or philosophically grounded normative framework about what is good and just.

Earlier I argued that Christians should derive their normative vision from biblical revelation. Discovering relevant biblical norms for politics is not, however, a matter of simple proof-texting. The Bible is full of commands, stories, proverbs—in short, a wide variety of materials written over many centuries.

We dare not arbitrarily select one text or one theme. Some want to focus only on God's ordination of government in Romans 13 or government as the beasts of Revelation 13. Similarly, some one-sidedly emphasize the theme of Exodus, others Jubilee, still others Nehemiah's nation building. Instead of an arbitrary emphasis on this or that text or theme, we must submit to the full biblical canon with Christ at its centre.²⁶

To develop a fully biblical perspective on political issues, we need two things: (a) a biblical view of the world

and persons (this comes especially from what I will call the biblical story); (b) comprehensive summaries of biblical teaching related to many concrete issues—for example, the family or economic justice (I call these biblical paradigms). To develop a normative biblical framework we must in principle examine all relevant biblical passages, understand each text according to proper principles of exegesis, and then formulate a comprehensive summary of all relevant canonical material. The most sweeping comprehensive summary would articulate a biblical view of the world and persons that flows from the biblical story. The other comprehensive summaries (or biblical paradigms) would cover things such as the poor, the family, work, justice, the dignity of persons, etc.

Some may argue that the Old Testament, at least, is irrelevant for society today since it was God's special revelation for the people of Israel living in a theocratic society. But that is to ignore the fact that God promised Abraham that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12:3) and that God called Israel to be a priest to the nations (Ex. 19:6). Israel was to be God's instrument of revelation to share with all people how the Creator wants people to live together in community. Repeatedly, the prophets applied the same standards which they used to judge the Israelites to surrounding nations (Amos 1, 2; Dan. 4:27). Again and again, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to a Messianic time when all nations would stream to Jerusalem to learn God's law (Isa. 2:2-4; 66:18; 25:7-8; cf. also Jer. 3:17).

That does not mean, however, that we should try to legislate today the

²⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 22.

specific details of Old Testament civil law. Modern society is vastly different from either ancient Israel's agricultural society in the time of the Judges or Kings or first century Roman society. It is the biblical paradigms that we apply. 'A paradigm is a particular case used to illustrate a general principle. It functions as a pattern for other cases where details and contexts vary but a basic principle remains unchanged.'²⁷ Thus the Bible does not offer a detailed blueprint for political life today.²⁸ But it does offer an important, essential normative framework.

b) Broad Study of Society and the World.

By itself, however, the biblical framework is insufficient. Nothing in the Bible talks explicitly about the pros and cons of a market economy or multinational corporations or the impact of over 6 billion people on the natural environment.

In addition to a normative framework, we need a broad, comprehensive study of our world. That study takes many forms. It includes reflections on

the historical development of society, the economy, political systems, etc. (As finite historical beings, we come to see some things more clearly as history unfolds.) It also includes, in principle, detailed, comprehensive socioeconomic and political analysis of everything relevant to any particular political question.²⁹

This careful study becomes central at two stages of analysis. One's analysis of the history of economics, politics, etc., helps to shape one's political philosophy. For example, as the Marxist experiment worked itself out in the course of the twentieth century, it became more and more clear not only that Marxist philosophy contradicted the biblical view of persons but also that in practice Marxism led to economic inefficiency and political totalitarianism. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly clear that both great good, and substantial injustice accompany the functioning of today's market economies. Detailed social analysis of everything relevant to a particular politician or piece of legislation is also crucial.

²⁷ *Political Christians in a Plural Society: A New Strategy for a Biblical Contribution* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1994), p. 58. For further discussion of this paradigmatic approach, see C.J.H. Wright, 'The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics', *Transformation*, 1/1 (April, 1984), pp. 11-20 and *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983). See also the somewhat parallel argument in Emil Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order* (New York: Harper, 1945), pp. 118-123.

²⁸ Mark A. Noll, *One Nation Under God: Christian Faith and Political Action in America*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) p. 172. William Temple, *Christianity and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 3-5.

²⁹ That of course raises the complex question: which sociology, which social science? Liberation theologians have been especially insistent on this question (see for example, Jose Miguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], chap. 3.). They have also been too quick to adopt a Marxist sociology and economics. Christians must be aware of secular and other non-Christian bias that often creeps into so-called neutral methodologies. See, for example, James Skillen's attempt to develop a Christianly informed method for political science in 'Toward a Comprehensive Science of Politics', in *Political Theory and Christian Vision*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 57ff.

c) Political Philosophy

In addition to a biblical framework and a broad study of society and the world, Christians engaged in politics also need a political philosophy. It is simply impossible, every time one wants to make a political decision, to spend days (actually years) reviewing mountains of relevant biblical material and complex studies of society. We need a framework, a road map, a handy guide—in short, a political philosophy. Furthermore, a political philosophy is much more than a handy road-map. If developed carefully, it provides a coherent, systematic framework that reveals the many interconnections of different parts of one's political philosophy. But we dare not adopt our political philosophy uncritically from some non-Christian source. It must emerge from our normative biblical framework and our painstaking, extensive socioeconomic and political analysis.

d) Detailed Social Analysis on Specific Issues

Even after a Christian has a political philosophy shaped by both a normative biblical framework and careful study of society and the world, he or she still needs to do detailed social analysis on everything relevant to a particular legislative proposal or a specific election. Two people could, in principle, have identical normative frameworks, identical historical analyses of modern society, and identical political philosophies and still disagree on whether or not, for example, to raise the minimum wage. Why? Because they rely on different economic analyses of the actual effects of raising the minimum wage. The only way to make progress on set-

ting such a disagreement is to go back together and do further detailed economic analysis. Careful social analysis of all the available information relevant to a specific political judgment is the fourth essential ingredient of responsible Christian political engagement.

The kind of study required for faithful Christian political engagement is far too complex for any one individual. We need communal activity, teams of scholars and activists, and organizations and networks working together to develop a common vision and agenda. For successful Christian political engagement, then, we need groups of Christians who can integrate a normative biblical framework, study of society and the world, a political philosophy (derived from the former two ingredients), and detailed social analysis as they approach every major issue of contemporary political life. That means working out concrete public policy proposals on everything from welfare to family policy to peace-making.

Knowing the complexity of such political judgments and the possibility of mistakes at every step, we must always hold our specific political conclusions with humility and tentativeness. But we should dare to advocate boldly for specific policies because we have sought to ground our specific conclusions in a biblical framework and responsible social analysis even as we honestly invite friend and foe alike to help us improve our analysis of both Scripture and society at every point.

It would help immensely to reduce political disagreements among Christians (and others) if we would be more precise about exactly where we disagree. It is unhelpful to confuse a dis-

agreement over the proper interpretation of Matthew 25 with lack of compassion for the poor or disagreement over the relative merits of more or less government intervention in market economies. To the extent that we can be precise about exactly where we disagree, we can make more progress in overcoming our differences.

It is absolutely crucial, however, that Christians first articulate and develop their political agenda and concrete proposals within the Christian community on the basis of biblical norms. If we do not, we will end up adopting secular norms and values and their corresponding political ideologies. The result will be a compromised, often fundamentally un-Christian, political engagement.

In this short paper, I do not have the space to flesh out the results of applying this methodology. I have tried to do that in my forthcoming book, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*. Here, I want to make just one central claim: If we start with a normative framework derived from biblical revelation, then our political agenda must reflect biblical balance.

V A Biblically Balanced Agenda

In the Scriptures, it is perfectly clear that the God of the Bible cares about the poor and the family, about peace-making *and* the sanctity of human life, about freedom *and* creation care. Any political engagement that claims to be Christian must be concerned with the full range of things that the Bible says God cares about. We dare not pick out one or two issues that suit our personal

preference or some narrow political agenda—whether family and abortion or economic justice and environmental concern—and neglect the others.

‘For the Health of the Nation’, the recent (2004) statement adopted unanimously by the board of the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States says pointedly: ‘The Bible makes it clear that God cares a great deal about the well-being of marriage, the family, the sanctity of human life, justice for the poor, care for creation, peace, freedom, and racial justice.’ The conclusion? ‘Faithful evangelical civic engagement must champion a biblically balanced agenda.’³⁰ The declaration goes on to focus seven crucial areas for evangelical political activity: religious freedom, family, the sanctity of human life, justice for the poor, human rights, peace and creation care. All are essential because God’s revealed word teaches that they all matter a great deal to God. Therefore we cannot pick and choose. We must embrace them all. If our politics is to be Christian we must adopt a biblically balanced agenda.

Of course that does not mean that every individual Christian must spend equal time on every issue. Individuals rightly specialize. Nor does it mean that Christian organizations focused on one issue (whether poverty or abortion) are wrong. But it does mean that all Christians must speak and act in such a way that everyone knows that they are not ‘one issue’ or ‘two issue’ people. It means that church leaders will teach their people how faithful

30 Sider and Knippers, eds., *Toward An Evangelical Public Policy* (Baker, 2005), p. 366.

Christians can develop and promote a biblically balanced political agenda. It means that when Christians vote and when they work full time in politics they will strive to encourage a concern for that same balanced agenda. If Christian political engagement focuses on just one or two issues, it is misguided, unfaithful, unbiblical.

VI Next Steps

I believe there is an urgent need for national evangelical alliances/fellowships all around the world to engage in a careful, extended process to develop a consensus evangelical statement on political engagement for their country. The basic methodology sketched here needs to be applied country by country. In the process, evangelicals/Pentecostals should listen to, interact with and critique both the history of Christian political thought and also the recent work on political engagement by Catholics and liberal Protestants.

But I believe the first, crucial step if evangelicals/Pentecostals want to develop a more biblically grounded, factually rooted, sophisticated political engagement is for the evangelical/Pentecostal community, country by country, to carefully, systematically develop a consensus evangelical/Pentecostal framework for civic engagement. Evangelicals/Pentecostals have significant things in common that they do not share with liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics. Furthermore, it is our community that is most lacking in solid, extensive reflection on this topic. Therefore I think we need to develop a country-by-country process to develop a consensus framework on political engagement that is widely

accepted as a faithful evangelical/Pentecostal framework.

As we do that country-by-country process, each country needs to listen to the parallel developing work on this topic in other places. Then, after several years of work in dozens of individual countries, it would probably be helpful to have a global conference of evangelicals/Pentecostals to see how much common ground has emerged. A global evangelical/Pentecostal declaration outlining the consensus that has emerged on political engagement could be an important help for national fellowships since brothers and sisters in other places often help us perceive blind spots which our particular setting prevents us from understanding clearly.

As evangelicals/Pentecostals develop much more extensive reflection on political engagement, they will become better prepared to work with other Christians in areas where they share common political views.

Imagine the impact if even a quarter of the total Christian community embraced a new political engagement that truly reflected a biblically balanced agenda and was conducted in an honest, confident yet humble way.

In Africa, south of the Sahara, professed Christians represent a substantial majority of all voters. The same is true in most of Latin America and the Philippines. In many countries in Asia, there is a rapidly growing Christian minority.

In the United States the vast majority of the citizens claim to be Christians. Because of its unique global power today, the United States could become a powerful force to reduce poverty, to promote freedom and

peace, to care for creation and to respect the sanctity of human life and the importance of the family—if a strong, minority of American citizens would decide to act vigorously and wisely to promote a biblically balanced political agenda.

One recent development is especially striking and potentially momentous. The new evangelical declaration, 'For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility' now represents the official stance of the National Association of Evangelicals (the largest evangelical network in the United States). Prominent evangelical leaders like Charles Colson, Rick Warren, Richard Land, and James Dobson have also signed it.

What is especially striking, however, is that the policy proposals of this evangelical declaration are overwhelmingly parallel to the official public policy agenda of Roman Catholics.³¹ Both communities' official teaching promotes a pro-poor and pro-life, pro-peace and pro-family, pro-freedom and pro-creation care agenda. Evangelicals constitute one quarter of all American voters. Catholics make up another one quarter. If these two communities, representing at least half of all American voters, discover how to work together over a couple of decades to promote their common framework for public life, they will transform American politics.

Similar things could happen in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Philippines. It is absolutely essential that evangelicals/Pentecostals and

Roman Catholics learn how to cooperate more deeply and effectively.

Wise, honest, biblically balanced political activity by Christians could dramatically transform our world in the next twenty-five years. We could substantially reduce poverty around the world. We could increase respect for the sanctity of human life and renew and strengthen the family. We could care for creation and pass on a sustainable planet to our grandchildren. We could reduce injustice, violence, and war. All of that is worth vigorous, sustained effort on the part of devout, biblical Christians.

Never, however, dare we expect utopia or exaggerate the importance of politics. Even the most successful, most faithful Christian political engagement will not bring in the kingdom. Christ will do that when he returns. Sin, injustice and violence will continue. But wise, biblically grounded Christian political engagement could save tens of millions of our neighbours from agony and death. It could create a better planet for our grandchildren to inhabit.

Above, everything, however, let us never forget that politics is not the Christian's only responsibility. It is not even the most important. Let us never forget to be the church, to worship our Lord, and to share the gospel with those who have never heard. Politics is important because it can nurture a better, more wholesome life for billions of neighbours for their brief sojourn on this gorgeous planet. But sharing the gospel leads not only to life abundant now but also life eternal. As we rejoice in the important but limited results that flow from faithful political engagement, let us revel in the unlimited, eternal blessings that flow from the gospel.

³¹ See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004).