

City of Man

by Michael Gerson

Thank you for the honor of this invitation. For more than three decades, the Center for Public Justice has been a voice of principled, reasoned discourse in our political system – a voice that is needed more than ever. And this institution has accepted a unique calling: to carry the legacy of Abraham Kuyper – one of the greatest Christian statesmen of any age – into the 21st century.

Kuyper's approach to Christian social engagement offers so many rich and relevant themes. He opposed the anti-religious humanism of the French revolution, resisted the aggressive secularization of Dutch society, provided a theoretic foundation for the authority of mediating institutions, fought for the possibility of Christian education, built ties between Reformed and Catholic believers, and defended the rights and interests of workers. It is tempting to call him a "compassionate conservative" before his time. In fact, we are pale reflections of Abraham Kuyper and his humane, faithful, compassionate vision of justice.

How religious people view politics – their political theology – matters greatly to everyone, religious and non-religious alike. Though faith is the most personal of matters, the content of faith has very public consequences.

In 1930s Germany, for example, many Christians were influenced by a political theology that showed broad deference to the state and by a long, disturbing history of anti-Semitism. Whole denominations – calling themselves "German Christians" – quickly accommodated themselves to a rising Nazi ideology.

There were, of course, heroic exceptions. But they were exceptions. On the whole, the political theology of Christians in Germany was deeply discrediting to their faith. And their failure of conscience and courage had terrible consequences for Germans of other faiths and no particular faith at all. A corrupted political theology helped lead to suffering beyond measure. The failure to confront Europe's genocide was one of the greatest scandals of religious history.

Yet only about twenty years later, a movement of conscience rooted in African-American churches began to transform America. The political theology of the civil rights movement, in stark contrast to the German example, emphasized the equality of individuals rooted in the image of God, the power of redemptive suffering and the promise of liberation given to Hebrews in Egyptian slavery.

Christian churches, in this case, became a place where people organized resistance to an oppressive government, a refuge for those fleeing persecution and a target of attacks and terrorism. African-American churches, along with their allies in mainline Christian denominations, brought honor to the faith they held. And their example of conscience motivated political changes – the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act – which benefited many outside their own religious communities.

These are the range of consequences that can flow from a political theology – complicity in genocide, or the redemption of a nation’s promise. The political views of influential religious groups determine much about the shape of a society, for good or ill. This is true of Wahabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia, who justify a system of comprehensive oppression. It is true of Buddhist monks in Burma, who have led the opposition against a cruel regime. And it is true of religious conservatives in the United States, who have taken a broader social and political role over the last few decades.

This movement of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians – its recent history, current trends and uncertain future – is the subject of a book I have co-authored with Pete Wehner of the Ethics and Public Policy Center called the City of Man, due out in October. It is the first in a new series on Christian cultural engagement, edited by Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York and published by Moody Press. The themes I raise this evening will be more fully addressed in that book. And I would suggest that the greatest immediate service you could make to the City of God would be to pre-order it at Hearts and Minds Books.

Fifty years ago, a serious discussion of political theology in America would have begun, and perhaps ended, with the liberal mainline. Thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr shaped Protestant attitudes on social justice and war and peace and held broad social influence. Liberal Protestants convened America’s ecumenical discussion with Jews and Catholics and took leadership in important projects of social reform.

But mainline churches have become, in the vivid words of the late Richard John Neuhaus, “sideline churches.” They have seen dramatic declines in attendance and influence, at least partially because they became too narrowly and predictably political. At the same time, the relative influence of conservative Protestant churches and movements has grown – along with the number of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated.

Protestants remain a majority in America. But theologically conservative Protestants are now a majority of this majority. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about 26 percent of American adults belong to evangelical Protestant churches – a larger percentage than either Catholic or mainline Protestant churches. In the 2004 presidential election, about 40 percent of George W. Bush’s vote came from Protestant evangelicals, making this group the most influential element of the Republican coalition, and perhaps the most influential single religious community in America. The beliefs of evangelicals have broad consequence for the country.

Secular elites in United States and in Europe have often looked at the checkered history of religious involvement in politics, thrown up their hands, and concluded that everyone would be better off if religious people would just to keep their views to themselves. Following Europe’s bloody wars of religion, Enlightenment thinkers in England and on the Continent argued that the

privatization of religion was the only safe option. But the two historical examples we have considered point to the limitations of this view. Christians in Germany should have been *more* public in their confrontation with Nazi authorities. Americans are generally grateful that the leaders of the civil rights movement did not regard their faith as fundamentally private. In addition, various experiments in enforced privatization and secularization since the Enlightenment – the French Revolution, Leninism, Maoism – cannot be counted as successes for human rights and dignity. There are dangers, it seems, both in societies dominated by religion and societies where that influence is banished.

These issues matter most to religious believers themselves. To the faithful, faith is far more important than politics. Nations and governments are temporary while the journey of the soul is eternal. But the public expression of faith often reveals the deepest commitments of the faithful, and determines their image in the world. Are believers concerned mainly about themselves or about others? Do they reflect a belief in an angry God or a loving God? Do they exemplify judgment or grace? Following Haiti's massive earthquake, one religious leader asserted that the tragedy extinguishing more than 200,000 lives was God's punishment on a nation dedicated to the devil. Others rushed to alleviate the suffering of the Haitian people. Advocates of both views were expressing a political theology – a view of how religious people should react to injustice in the world.

Sorting out the proper relationship between religion and politics is particularly difficult for Christians. Unlike Moses or Mohammed, Jesus of Nazareth did not set out a political blueprint or ideal of any kind. He specifically rejected the political utopianism of some of his followers. He lived within a Roman Empire that he barely mentioned. His main arguments were with religious authorities, not political ones. He proclaimed a kingdom "not of this world," which consisted of transformed lives, not alternative leaders and legal structures.

Yet Jesus was executed, in part, as an enemy of the state. Political and religious leaders found the otherworldly kingdom he declared to be threatening, because it demanded obedience to an authority beyond their own. Jesus' followers were soon being executed for failing to show proper respect (refusing to offer sacrifices) to the Roman emperor. Christians in the Roman world challenged the political status quo in a number of ways, on issues such as slavery, infanticide and the status of women. While Christianity taught no ideal government, "love your neighbor" had social and political consequences.

Christians in every generation have been left with the same tension. They inhabit, in Saint Augustine's vivid image, the City of Man – the realm of history, government and politics – while owing their ultimate allegiance to the City of God. This dual citizenship is difficult. When the faithful exercise political power, it can result in oppression and discredit the faith itself. Christians have seldom been less appealing than when acting in the name of "Christendom." But when the faithful ignore political power, they can also bring discredit to their ideals and betray their neighbors. Sins of omission can be deadly as well. So politics is both a temptation and a responsibility – an addictive drug and a healing medicine.

Reflecting on these issues is always important. Now it is urgent, because we have entered a time of transition. One political theology – the model of the religious

right – is passing in America. Another, still unformed, is taking its place. It is an exciting moment, when new movements and institutions are taking shape. It is also a plastic moment – a moment when apparently small flaws might be introduced that eventually lead to large cracks, rendering the vessel useless. Errors at the beginning of an enterprise are always the most dangerous. A time of change is also a time of heightened responsibility.

Precisely because the institutions and leaders of the religious right are passing, it is now possible to take some stock of its successes and failures. And we should take the successes seriously.

The religious right gained many critics, but it also displayed a number of democratic virtues. The cultural separatism of many evangelicals following the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy was an understandable reaction to a hostile culture. But it was also an abdication of citizenship. Religious right leaders led an alienated group of voters back into the public square after a generation in the wilderness. The religious right employed all the traditional methods of democratic engagement – voter registration drives, training activists, knocking on doors, conducting marches and demonstrations. Surveys of members of Christian right organizations reveal that large percentages have contacted public officials, circulated petitions and written letters to the editor. With any other alienated group of American voters, this reengagement would be regarded as democratic progress – as it should be regarded in the case of the religious right.

In an authoritarian state, Christian citizenship may consist of simply living with honesty and integrity; of modeling an alternative set of values in a degraded political environment. In a democracy, such integrity is important – but so is fulfilling the various duties of self-government. Citizens in a democracy actually share in the responsibility of exercising sovereignty. This responsibility necessarily involves dangers, temptations and compromises. But engagement is not merely an option; it is an obligation. Not every believer is called to be a politician or activist. But every member of a democratic political community is required to be a responsible citizen. Emotional swings from utopianism to separationism are an indication of political immaturity. Citizens of a democracy remain involved in the public square because important issues of justice are at stake in every political moment, and because democratic duties are not determined by the moods of any given political moment.

Another democratic virtue of the religious right, perhaps surprisingly, was its religious inclusiveness. Falwell's Moral Majority was specifically designed to include Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Mormons. The pro-life movement involved close cooperation between fundamentalists and Catholics. The establishment of a political coalition based on shared moral values required the toning down of theological exclusivity – and the overcoming of old prejudices. Groups divided by large theological gaps found themselves sharing the same political and cultural foxholes.

The cooperation between evangelical Protestants and Catholics is particularly noteworthy. Their mutual antipathy has been a feature of American politics for most of our history. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger once called prejudice against Catholics “the deepest bias in the history of the American people.” Following a wave of Catholic immigration in the early 19th century, the Know-Nothing Party preached a vicious brand of anti-Catholicism with broad social resonance. Evangelicals often thought of Romanism and alcohol – which they regarded as synonymous – as the greatest threats to America. Religious conflicts often fed violence. Mobs in Boston burned Irish-Catholic homes in 1829 and 1833. In 1844, Catholics in Philadelphia petitioned the school board to allow Catholic students to read their own version of the Bible instead of the King James Version. Protestants accused Catholics of trying to ban the Bible entirely. Nativist rioters burned two Catholic churches and hundreds of homes. Twenty people died in the violence.

Though the intensity had faded, anti-Catholicism was still a serious issue among Protestants when John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960. Many, including Norman Vincent Peal, warned that Kennedy would take orders from the Pope in Rome.

In light of this history of mutual suspicion and hostility, the close cooperation of evangelicals and Catholics fostered by the religious right was unprecedented. Catholic leaders such as Rep. Henry Hyde and Justice Antonin Scalia became heroes for many conservative Protestants. Evangelicals broadly respected Pope John Paul II for his pro-life convictions, opposition to Communism and personal holiness. In 1994, conservative Protestant leader Charles Colson and Father Richard Neuhaus co-signed a document called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” indicating a broad ecumenical rapprochement. Common moral values and political concerns had at least partially overcome old theological conflicts. In the case of conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics, democratic engagement was a healing force.

Despite many setbacks, the religious right succeeded in demonstrating a broad resistance to the legal establishment of secularism. Elements of modern liberalism have contended (and still contend) that religiously motivated arguments are fundamentally private and thus illegitimate as the basis for public policy. This novel conception of the separation of church and state means that citizens may advocate a certain political view because of utilitarianism or liberalism or vegetarianism, but not because of moral views rooted in Christianity or Judaism. Religious conservatives have stoutly resisted this notion. They have reminded us that much of American political history – from abolition to the civil rights movement – is the story of religiously-informed social activism. They have stood for the principle that a genuine pluralism must include religious people.

From a socially conservative perspective, the religious right did have successes. It slowed the movement toward a permissive society, providing some structured opposition to cultural liberalism. When *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, essentially legalizing abortion on demand, an editorial in *The New York Times* announced that the abortion debate was over in America. In part because of the religious right, that debate continues, with a majority of Americans in some polls now considering themselves pro-life. Given the cultural forces arrayed against pro-

life Americans – from the legal system, to elite culture, to a broad social ethic of autonomy and convenience – this resistance is a remarkable achievement. The religious right was part of a political coalition that defended and encouraged an active, moral role for America in the world, especially in the conduct of the Cold War.

It is difficult to argue that the religious right achieved many of its legislative goals. After three decades of activism, there are few, national legal restrictions on abortion. Pornography is pervasive. Entertainment is more coarse and explicit than ever. Family structures are fragile, especially among the poor. The country seems on the verge of accepting gay marriage. But the religious right can claim an important negative achievement – it prevented the complete victory of liberal secularism. It slowed social trends it could not reverse. It encouraged a national debate on the role of character and values in an orderly, just society. It did not transform America into the City of God, but it demonstrated that America is not Sweden.

As a social movement, however, the religious right cannot be considered a model. The language and tone of the religious right was often apocalyptic, off-putting and counterproductive. It seemed to thrive on the cultivation of crisis. “Just like what Nazi Germany did to the Jews,” said Jerry Falwell, “so liberal America is now doing to evangelical Christians.” “Never again,” said a Christian Coalition mailing, “will we be subject to a government that dishonors our Lord.” Such melodrama was good for fundraising, but bad for American politics. It was not enough for political opponents to be wrong; they were modern Nazis and enemies of God. This approach makes a civil political conversation impossible, not to mention its affect on a broader Christian witness to society.

According to theologian Carl Henry, the religious right adopted a “political methodology... which reflected the emotive rather than the rational character of contemporary politics. Reasoned discourse was neglected for semantic combat. Media one-liners compensated for a lack of think tanks, and public demonstration largely replaced the effort to persuade wavering or unconvinced office-holders.... In short, the new Christian right largely forfeited the opportunity to formulate a persuasive public philosophy and to exhibit what it means to engage in politics Christianly.”

Too often, the political engagement of the religious right was politically predictable. During the 1980s, the Christian Voice issued political report cards measuring candidate views not only on school prayer and abortion, but also on support for an American defense treaty with Taiwan and opposition to a national Department of Education. There were no categories concerning the relief of poverty or racial equality. This highly partisan selection of issues left a strong impression that the religious right was the tool of a specific political ideology instead of an independent voice. Like the social gospel before it, the religious right seemed to baptize someone else’s political agenda, rather than provide a unique perspective based a different set of moral priorities. When Falwell was asked why helping the

poor was not listed among the Moral Majority's founding objectives, he responded: "We could never bring the issue of the poor into the Moral Majority because the argument would be, Who is going to decide what will reach those people? Mormons? Catholics? No, we won't get into that." The more appropriate question is: Given the teachings and priorities of the Bible – which indicates that "those people" are especially valued by God – what possible Christian approach to politics could avoid the issue of poverty?

The most important problem of the religious right has not been tonal or strategic; it has been theological. Conservative Christians have sometimes simplistically identified biblical teachings on the nature and destiny of Israel with their conception of the nature and destiny of America. Because ancient Israel was rewarded or punished by God because of the conduct of its people and rulers, America would be rewarded or punished by God because of the conduct of its people and rulers. A corrupt present was compared to an idealized past, in which America was a Christian nation deserving of divine blessing. The Founding Fathers, according to Falwell, "developed a nation predicated on Holy Writ." The only way, in this view, to merit divine favor once again is to "reclaim America for Christ."

This view of the New World as the new Israel has a long history, reaching back to the Pilgrim settlers. But such a pedigree does not make it correct.

The idea of a Christian America represents a misunderstanding of history. America was not founded as a Christian nation precisely because the Founders were informed by a Jewish and Christian understanding of human nature. Since humans are autonomous moral beings created in God's image, freedom of conscience is essential to their dignity. On religious matters, the Founder asserted, citizens should be subject to God and their conscience, not to the state (as least where the federal government was concerned). America was designed to be a pluralistic nation in which all faiths are welcomed, not a Christian nation in which one faith is favored. And disestablishment has served the Christian faith well, preserving it from being corrupted and tainted by political power.

This confusion of America with ancient Israel – with its assumption that corporate morality determines divine favor – can lead to theological and moral absurdities. In response to gay pride day at Walt Disney World, Pat Robertson once said, "I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you." Following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Pennsylvania, Robertson and Falwell blamed abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, the ACLU and the People for the American Way for America's deserved punishment.

Without denying that God is ultimately in charge of human history, it is necessary to assert that such interpretations of tragic events are arrogant, offensive and theologically unsound. It is not immediately evident why religious right leaders should have special prophetic insight into God's purposes in history. Or why the failures that especially offend them should count more than other sins such as pride, social injustice and indifference to the poor (the actual priorities of Old Testament prophets warning Israel's rulers). Or why a child in Orlando should die in a hurricane because a homosexual attends a local amusement park. Or why the family of a 9/11 victim should blame the ACLU rather than al Qaeda. A simplistic

conception of divine providence – the punishment of individuals for the sake of corporate offenses – makes a mockery of individual moral agency and opens Christian leaders to charges of monstrous indifference to tragedy.

This approach, in fact, closely resembles other fundamentalist religious traditions that associate the moral practices of a nation with divine favor or disfavor. Not long ago, a senior Iranian cleric blamed earthquakes in his country on declining sexual standards. “Many women who do not dress modestly... lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society, which increases earthquakes.” “What can we do to avoid being buried under the rubble?” he asked. “There is no other solution but to take refuge in religion and to adapt our lives to Islam’s moral codes.” Suffice it to say that if a correlation between lack of modesty and earthquakes existed, Brazil would seldom have a moment’s peace.

Every nation, like every life, is a mixture of ruin and nobility. “The antithesis between godliness and ungodliness is very real,” says theologian Richard Mouw, “but it discernable no only in the larger patterns of culture, but also in the inner battlegrounds of our own souls” In Christian belief, God’s ultimate goal is to bring men and women into communion with Himself. His dealings with the world serve that purpose. And God’s purpose is often advanced through redemptive suffering, which is not a punishment, but a mystery and a method of grace. Just as cancer is not a sign of divine disfavor, hurricanes are not a sign of divine punishment. The workings of God in the midst of tragedy cannot be reduced to a simplistic moral mathematics in which sin yields disaster, precisely because America is not a covenant community on the model of ancient Israel. The community of faith is found in every nation. Believers share the blessings and tragedies of their neighbors and should work and pray for the common good – not declare the suffering of their neighbors to be something deserved.

All of these failures of the religious right – failures of tone, strategy and sympathy – combined to cause a social backlash deeper than political trends. The politicization of religion by the religious right, argues sociologist Robert Putnam, caused many young people in the 1990s to turn against religion itself, adopting the attitude: “If this is religion, I’m not interested.” Americans in the 20s are now much more secular than the Baby Boomers were at the same stage of life. About 30 to 35 percent are religiously unaffiliated. Putnam calls this “a stunning development.” The religious right, it turns out, was not good for religion.

The religious right began as a reaction against the aggressions of the modern world. It ended by squandering much of its promise because it was too reactive. Often it reacted to anger with anger. It reacted against the liberal social 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 opponents of the religious right to set the agenda. Because liberal elites and courts pushed on issues such as abortion and secularization, conservative Christian engagement became defined by opposition to abortion and secularization. I believe that these moral issues are vital to the character and future of the country. But I do not believe such issues exhaust the Christian contribution to the City of Man. The next phase of

Christian social engagement will need to move beyond reaction, applying first principles to a broad range of public concerns.

The political theology of conservative Protestants is changing. Many evangelical Christians no longer want to be identified with the tone and approach of the religious right. The generational shift from leaders such as Pat Robertson to leaders such as Rick Warren has been dramatic. A new cadre of evangelical political, media and artistic leaders is more interested in shaping the predominate culture than resisting it. Evangelical activists are increasingly engaged on a broader range of social concerns, including poverty, religious freedom, the environment and global health. The American evangelical movement has become more global in orientation, more diverse in background, and less tied to a single political party.

Yet, while the religious right has declined, a new political theology has yet to take shape. Many evangelicals are simply confused. They are uncomfortable with the image and conduct of the religious right. As biblical Christians, however, they remain morally conservative. And they are suspicious of the social gospel of liberal Protestantism, which often seemed to replace the gospel with social activism. They sense that both the religious right and the religious left may be making the same mistake – simply baptizing someone else’s policy agenda and calling it Christian. They wonder: Is every generation condemned to repeat the same old mistakes in new ways?

In the City of Man, Pete Wehner and I attempt to begin the task of starting to provisionally examine – I hope I put enough qualifiers in there – a new political theology for conservative Christians. American believers need more than an expanded list of political issues. They need to reflect more deeply on the purposes of government, and the distinctive contributions that Christians should bring to the political realm.

We focus on four categories where government has a proper role in our lives. First, there is the tranquility of order, rooted in a realistic view of human nature. Second, there is the pursuit of justice, which, in a Christian view, must include the poor and weak. Third, there is the cultivation of virtue – generally not done directly by government, but indirectly through recognizing and promoting value-shaping institutions. The fourth category is prosperity and economic flourishing, which is often wrongly dismissed by Christians as a lower order of concern.

In addition, we argue that the tone, bearing and countenance of Christian social engagement are especially important. There are practical reasons for using language that is reasonable, judicious and sober rather than aggressive, abrasive and abusive. On the whole, people drawn to a cause like to feel that those representing the cause are both amiable and peaceable. But employing the right tone depends on more than utilitarian considerations. More fundamentally, it has to do with our view of human dignity. It means treating people with respect and good manners regardless of the views they might hold. A significant dissonance between one’s content and tone – between the Christian case for human dignity and the

language of anger and aggression – can be discrediting. Fresh water and salt water don't flow from the same source.

And this commitment to civility is most tested in times of political setback. Christians have the right, even the duty, to bring their deepest moral convictions to the public square. But sometimes those convictions will be ignored or rejected. People of faith will lose – lose debates, lose elections, lose power. The test of a democracy is not what people do when they win; it is what people do when they lose. And sometimes losing in the right way can be a public witness. This is when magnanimity and generosity of spirit are most needed – along with the recognition that, in a democracy, even lost causes can rise again.

There is no question that the religious right has demonstrated the dangers of political engagement. But the responsible alternative to doing politics badly is doing politics better – not turning against the political process itself.

It is increasingly argued in Christian circles that culture is “upstream” from politics – that songs and scholarship, movies and technological innovation, novels and newspapers ultimately determine a nation's shape, not primarily its laws. And there is truth in this point.

Politics usually involves one form of power: coercion, either through the demands of law or the demands of taxation. But there are other forms of power in a society. The power of beauty and myth. The power of ideas and academic excellence. The power of example and integrity. Ancient Greece, in large part, was the creation of a blind poet. The American colonies were the product of a thousand non-conformist sermons.

The pursuit and exercise of *political* power poses special challenges and dangers to religious believers. It is disturbing to see Christians jealous of their access, displaying bitterness toward opponents and easily exploited in the power games of others. For many Americans, it is not only disturbing but discrediting.

The wrong kind of politics can not only compromise an individual believer but undermine the message of the church itself. Any political movement – particularly a virtuous political movement – can become a consuming substitute for faith. And the line is fine between zeal and anger. “I was one of those caught up in the mood and action of the 1960s,” wrote Sheldon Vanauken in the epilogue to *A Severe Mercy*. “Christ, I thought, would surely have me oppose what appeared an unjust war. But the Movement, whatever its ideals, did a good deal of hating. And Christ gradually was pushed to the rear: Movement goals, not God, became first, in fact – not only for me but for other Christians involved, including priests. I now think that making God secondary (which in the end is to make Him nothing) is, quite simply, *the* mortal danger in social action, especially in view of the marked intimations of virtue – even arrogant virtue – that often perilously accompany it. Some may avoid this danger, perhaps. But I was not obeying the first and greatest commandment – to love God *first* – nor is it clear that I was obeying the second – to *love* my neighbor. Hating the oppressors of my neighbor isn't perhaps quite what Christ had in mind.”

The same story could be told on the political right just as easily.

Politics is not only inherently dangerous; it is inherently difficult. As Reinhold Niebuhr argued, political debates seldom pit light against darkness, whatever its participants may imagine, but instead involve the weighing of relative goods. A military intervention liberates millions while resulting in the death of thousands. An environmental law saves a species or wilderness for future generations while costing jobs that support families. In politics, prudence is a higher, rarer virtue than purity. Uncertain judgment calls are both unavoidable and consequential. And those who make such judgments can easily fall victim, in Niebuhr's words, to the "insinuation of the interests of the self into even the most ideal enterprises and most universal objectives."

In every generation, some believers conclude that political engagement is not worth the risk and the inevitable cost. We hear those voices once again. Since culture is upstream from politics, perhaps Christians should relocate to more pleasant territory upstream. Perhaps they should focus more on cultural formation than political activism. Perhaps they should be content with demonstrating the values of the City of God instead of writing statutes for the City of Man.

The problem is this: Culture is upstream from politics, except in those important cases when politics is upstream from culture.

In April of 1963, a group of eight Birmingham clergy members made a famous argument about the limits and dangers of political activism. Writing in the Birmingham News, they criticized civil rights activism as "unwise and untimely" and urged believers to show patience. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., then in the Birmingham City Jail, began writing a response on the margins of a newspaper. "Frankly," he said, "I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."

King's argument was simple and damning: Patience for political injustice comes easier for those who are not currently experiencing injustice. "Perhaps it is easy," he says, "for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen the vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters... when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you go forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness' – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

Of course, not every political issue is as clear or as urgent as the civil rights movement. But it is worth remembering that most evangelicals, at the time, did not find the civil rights struggle particularly clear or urgent. "How sad," writes the great Christian pastor John Perkins, "that so few individuals equally committed to Jesus Christ ever became part of the [civil rights] movement. For what all that political activity needed – and lacked – was spiritual input. Even now, I do not understand why so many evangelicals find a sense of commitment to civil rights and Jesus Christ an 'either-or' proposition. One of the greatest tragedies of the civil rights moments

is that evangelicals surrendered their leadership in the movement by default to those with either a bankrupt theology or no theology at all, simply because the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians ignored a great and crucial opportunity in history for genuine ethical action.”

All of the cautions about a politicized faith are true. Niebuhr was correct to urge realism about the world, humility in making grand moral claims and suspicion about our own political motives. But Christians, particularly younger Christians, should internalize King’s prison letter before accepting Niebuhr’s corrective. A distrust of political action – a preference for gradual cultural change – would have left legal segregation in place to this day. Changing a culture of bigotry required both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act – coercive measures that created a social expectation of equal treatment and shifted the political balance of power in America. And none of this would have happened without idealism, impatience and the single-minded pursuit of justice.

So we are left with an unavoidable tension, a necessary complexity. There is danger in a politicized faith. There is also moral abdication and historical judgment when faith ignores the opportunity for “genuine ethical action.” Laws involve coercion. They also create the moral context for a culture – defining the boundaries of the community and the duties we owe our fellow citizens. Laws do more than reflect the pre-existing values of a society; they habituate the ideals and expectations of a society. Even as Christians abandon their political illusions they cannot avoid their responsibilities as citizens of America and of the City of Man.

Individual political priorities will and should vary by calling and conviction. But let me conclude with three propositions about politics more broadly:

Politics is the realm of necessity. At any given moment in a democracy, great issues of justice and morality are at stake. The idea that people of faith can take a sabbatical from politics to collect their thoughts and lick their wounds is a form of irresponsibility. It is, in fact, an argument that could only be made by comfortable Christians. If one lived in a neighborhood plagued by poverty, dominated by gangs and served by failing schools, there is no sabbatical from the failures of politics. Getting drug dealers off the corner and teaching children the basics of reading and math are at least as important as long-term cultural change, and certainly more urgent. If one lived in a foreign country without medicines for AIDS, malaria or tuberculosis, or dominated by a cruel dictator, the current policy priorities of the American people and its government would matter greatly. Retreating from the cause of justice, even temporarily, is only conceivable for those who have few needs for justice themselves.

Political engagement is not a luxury. The fighting of raging fires requires, not contemplation, but a fire extinguisher. Such urgency will involve errors that should be admitted and corrected. But, as G.K. Chesterton said, “even a bad shot is dignified by a duel.”

Politics is the realm of hope and possibility. In the late 1990s, Paul Weyrich, a prominent leader of the religious right, circulated a public letter declaring that

America was “caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics.” America was descending into “something approaching barbarism.” People of faith, he argued, should adopt a “strategy of separation.” “We need some sort of quarantine,” Weyrich concluded.

But something unexpected happened on the way to American cultural collapse. A number of reformers in cities and state governments demonstrated that at least some of our cultural decay was not the result of bad values but of failed policy. Better policies dramatically reduced violent crime rates, cut teenage drug use, ended welfare dependency, encouraged dignified work and improved performance in many low-income schools. Cultural fatalism was simply not justified. Problems that may seem intractable at one moment—violence and disorder, harmful and reckless conduct—can yield, and yield quickly, to the right policies and to a determined citizenry. Far from being discredited by recent history, politics has shown a remarkable ability to improve lives. This would a sad and ironic time to dismiss or devalue the political enterprise.

Politics can be the realm of nobility. At its best, politics is about the right ordering of our lives together. It cannot be unimportant because justice is never unimportant. Political rhetoric and ideals can raise the moral sights of a nation and point men and women to responsibilities beyond the narrow bounds of self and family. Creative policy can serve the common good, in a local school or on the other side of the world. “Public life is regarded as the crown of a career,” said John Buchan, “and to young men it is the worthiest ambition. Politics is still the greatest and most honorable adventure.” This has been my experience. Other young men and women will also find it so.

They must remember, however, that while politics is our duty, it is not our hope. It is a noble calling; it is not our ultimate destination. Christians are useful in public life precisely because they recognize a wide world of eternal values and meaning beyond the political realm. We work for the good and health of this earthly city. We hope for a city where there is no more death, no more tears, no more suffering and no more sorrow. The City of Man is our residence for now, and we care for its order and justice. But the City of God is our home.
