

**The Bible and Vision of the Evangelical Left**

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## I. Introduction

In *God's Politics*, theologian and activist Jim Wallis tells a story about a “Bible full of holes.” He writes of his first year at divinity school when he and a group of classmates “scoured the Old and New Testaments for every single reference to poor people, to wealth and poverty, to injustice and oppression, and to what the response to all those subjects was to be for the people of God.”<sup>1</sup> The students found thousands of verses – it was the second most prominent theme in the Bible after idolatry. After completing this exercise, Wallis and his classmates discussed the treatment of the subject of poverty and the poor in their churches growing up, concluding that “In the Bible, the poor were everywhere; yet the subject was not to be found in our churches.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, one student took a pair of scissors and cut out every line the Bible had about the poor. This was meant to show how their churches viewed the Bible, according to what they taught. Wallis and his group were so moved by what they were left with that he began bringing it to congregations and proclaiming that “this *is* our American Bible; it is full of holes.”<sup>3</sup> The idea of a Bible full of holes – in those terms or otherwise, subconsciously or otherwise –

*Hunger*, theologian and activist Ron Sider points out that “Affluent Christians remember Sodom’s sexual misconduct and forget her sinful unconcern for the poor. Is it because the former is less upsetting? Have we allowed our economic self-interest to distort our interpretation of Scripture?”<sup>4</sup> This is the basis of the evangelical left’s philosophy regarding the prioritized aspects of Christianity that have achieved prominence in the U.S. The most important idea Sider brings forth, for the purposes of this paper, is that Christians have chosen what to remember and what to forget about Sodom. Instead of being put off by Sodom’s lack of concern for the poor, people are put off by the sex-related parts of her story. Sider’s point raises the idea that Christians have a say in what they take away from the Bible and where they place the greater emphasis, and that the choices they make have significant implications for the world that Christians create. This indicates that Christians can choose to reverse course and bring poverty to the forefront of Christian thinking, in place of what now occupies that space. This is one goal of the evangelical left; it aims to replace the “pelvic issues” typically inclusive of abortion, contraception, and LGBTQ rights with poverty issues as top concern for Christians. The left recognizes that Americans are more inclined to focus on the former, so it will take a significant shift in perspective to bring the latter more into focus.

The matter of convenience is prominent in the evangelical left’s view of religious practice. As Sider points out, it is easier to follow certain rules than others. Christians’ focus in regard to Sodom is on sexual behavior and not treatment of the poor. One might argue that the task of improving treatment of the poor is more complex than merely abstaining from certain sexual behavior. Sider quotes Martin Luther, the very founder of Protestantism, who “once said that ‘if you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal

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Sider, 77.



want to be comfortable with being wealthy or achieving wealth, so we frame certain sins as

political spotlights –

causes.”<sup>8</sup> This marked a significant association between a political activist and an evangelical Christian connecting the two philosophies. He used such issues as pornography, prayer in schools, and abortion as potential catalysts for this movement, but it was racial segregation that proved to be the issue most conducive to bringing evangelicals into politics. In the 1971 court case *Green v. Connally*, the Court ruled that segregated schools could not receive tax-exempt

(particularly Weyrich and Falwell). Notably, evangelicals and political conservatives alike were not as hyperfocused on abortion as we might assume them to have been prior to this ruling.

Balmer notes that, in 1967, then Governor of California Ronald Reagan had signed the country's most liberal abortion bill into law. Theologian Francis A. Schaeffer kickstarted the anti-abortion campaign in the late 1970s, as he believed that "legalized abortion would lead inevitably to infanticide and euthanasia, and he was eager to sound the alarm."<sup>11</sup> Schaeffer developed a film series depicting graphic accounts of abortion, which he travelled around the U.S. to show. This, combined with Weyrich and Falwell's efforts to use abortion to fuel the emerging religious right, helped anti-abortion sentiment gain traction among Christians and voters alike (it had always been top of mind for Catholics, but evangelical Protestants now gradually began to focus on it as well). Democrat Jimmy Carter's subsequent loss of the 1980 presidential election told these evangelical leaders that their work was paying off in tangible ways. Carter was an interesting figure in that he was both an evangelical Christian and a Democrat. By the time of this election, Weyrich, Falwell, and those following their movement had aligned themselves with the Republican Party; despite surface-level similarities, the evangelical right sided against one of their own in 1980, showing their commitment to certain politics.

Since the 1970s, when evangelicals became more closely and publicly related with the political right through issues of segregation and abortion, they have remained aligned with the Republican party on other issues as well. Jerry Falwell's founding of the Moral Majority, a Christian political lobbying group, was crucial to the advancement of evangelicals' relationship with politics. The Moral Majority attracted primarily white Protestants. This group focused on "family values" and opposed abortion, LGBTQ rights, and the establishment of rights for women

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Ibid.



and people of color.<sup>12</sup> All of this was based on a particular set of biblical values. Other similar groups emerged who advocated for and against the same issues, but the Moral Majority remained the largest and proved the most influential. Presidential candidates from Reagan to Trump have recognized the impact the evangelical right has on elections and many have acted accordingly so as to win that bloc's vote. We continue to see and experience the influence of this group in politics and society.

The evangelical right's beginnings illuminate their focuses today. It gained momentum due to anxieties about race and states' rights that were translated into an intense focus on abortion and other "sex"-related issues, and we still equate it with such values. Race and states' rights do not appear to have correlation with sex-related issues, but they are connected in that each is a central feature of conservative Republican philosophy. Since the evangelical right was so connected to the Republican party, it seamlessly progressed from focusing on race and states' rights to the

understanding the evangelical right's stance on poverty and treatment of the poor today. What was not central at the inception of the modern evangelical right has taken time to gain traction.

While the Christian right has held what appears to be a monopoly on religio-political discourse since the 1970s, left-leaning Christians have been present in their current form since the late 1970s, albeit out of the spotlight. Before it took on its current form, the Christian left existed for a long time in different fashions. Its focuses are traditionally "income inequality, racism, violence, hunger and homelessness"<sup>13</sup> and they fluctuate in their agreement with the evangelical right on other matters such as abortion and LGBTQ rights. The most recent data available is from a 2014 Pew Research survey which shows that 13% of evangelical Protestants are politically liberal and 27% are politically moderate,<sup>14</sup> showcasing that not all evangelicals are

work,”<sup>17</sup> all of which suggest a theological conservatism. However, he makes the distinction that “theological conservatism does not necessarily entail political conservatism.”<sup>18</sup> Historical figures such as Charles Finney and William Jennings Bryan have set the precedent that religion can be used to advance progressive ideals. Modern figures such as Barack Obama, in his appeal to Christian voters during his presidential campaign, continue this tradition of relating Christianity to progressive politics.

A few prominent figures lead today’s evangelical left. Among them is Jim Wallis, a theologian, teacher, writer, and activist. In the early 1970s, Wallis began what is now known as

this religious tradition. Thus, we see that faith alone informs much of the action that Protestants take – including political action. Gasaway suggests that “There are indeed clear signs that more and more evangelicals—especially younger generations—believe that they have a responsibility to work for social justice,”<sup>21</sup> and that this might indicate an uptick in evangelical left-aligned ideology and practice. The context of today’s evangelical left is one that includes dramatic calls for social justice, widespread societal involvement with political matters, and a renewed focus on the government and society’s treatment of the poor. This group now finds itself situated in a

practice: 9/11 marked a time in which he shifted his perspective regarding his own obligations from being primarily an individual and private matter to being a broader public matter.

Christians can apply this thinking to their lives and jobs as well. Be they a lawmaker, someone in another profession, or simply a citizen and voter, Christians can follow Gerson's thinking here and apply their personal values to their more public lives. Gerson goes on to explain that it is not

Christians to the cause as well. This body has always emphasized racial equality and social justice, including that for women and LGBTQ people, thus steering them on the side of the political left. Among the most prominent leaders of the Christian left was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While today we view him largely as a champion of civil rights, he was so in the context of being a Baptist minister. His assertion that “Was not Jesus an extremist for love?”<sup>26</sup> from his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail* sets the stage for what Black Christian activism was and would become. King used religion to rally people behind social justice issues. This is reminiscent of today’s evangelical left that is using the Bible to try to influence faith, action, and politics.

Black Christianity has pointedly distinguished itself from other, typically white and European, forms of Christian theology. James Cone argues this point, contributing further to the idea of the longstanding existence of the evangelical left, even if it did not take this particular name. He writes that “Black Theology differs in perspective, content, and style from the western theological tradition transmitted from Augustine to Barth.”<sup>27</sup> Black Theology has been different from the time of its inception. Still today, it takes a different character than mainstream white theology. Cone is adamant that “I am a *black* theologian! I therefore must approach the subject

Jesus' liberation as well as his close connection to those struggling. Cone explains that "There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land – their history and culture."<sup>29</sup> He then discusses that, in the U.S., the oppressed are largely people of color; however, this also includes the poor in general. Jesus' connection to the oppressed is central to the truth of the Bible for Cone and other Black Theologians. Because of this, Cone is "baffled that many American white theologians still continue to do theology independently of the oppressed of the land."<sup>30</sup> That Christians could ignore such a core aspect of Jesus' identity, life, and story is a foreign concept





closely related, as are the latter two. Verses and themes in each of these categories build upon each other to show the various ways in which Christians are called to help the poor.

Several passages show God's preference for the poor over the wealthy. This is significant because it emphasizes that God values neither riches nor those who have them. The Book of Proverbs is home to many such verses. Among them are Proverbs 14:31 "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God;"<sup>33</sup> Proverbs 19:17 "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done;"<sup>34</sup> and Proverbs 21:13 "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered."<sup>35</sup> Stating that those who help the poor honor God and will be rewarded (and conversely, the prayers of those who do not help the poor will not be answered) shows that God gives preferential treatment to the poor and those who show they are on their side. Other such verses come from the Gospel of Luke. Luke 1:53 asserts that "He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty"<sup>36</sup> and Luke 6:20 asserts that "Looking at his disciples, he said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'"<sup>37</sup> These



neighbor fairly, and helping Israelites who have become poor so that they may continue to live as one's neighbor are all acts of kindness and generosity that require an extra step to carry out. The Bible repeats these examples of acts people can do to help the poor. Other instances of commands to help the poor include Psalm 82:3-4 "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked"<sup>42</sup> and Deuteronomy 15:7-8 "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need."<sup>43</sup> Again, we see that many verses emphasize taking action to help the poor even when it is not convenient. The Bible calls on people to defend and rescue those who need it, and, importantly, not to do so begrudgingly but with an open heart and hand.

A strong argument for helping the poor is that this directly helps God. For example, Isaiah 61:1 says that "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,"<sup>44</sup> showing that to help the poor is to fulfill God's wishes. Similarly, Matthew 25:40 expresses that "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"<sup>45</sup> This is a clear, overt statement that one's actions towards the poor directly affect God Himself. These passages are important in our understanding of the Bible because they show that God has specifically asked His followers to help the poor as a way of helping God.

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Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

In addition to helping God, helping the poor in turn benefits the person providing the help. This line of thinking is in keeping with aforementioned ideas of self-interest; while Sider asks a question in regard to economic self-interest, there is also an aspect of evangelical Christianity that has to do with setting oneself up for success after death (meaning, getting into heaven). I do not argue that self-interest is the *primary*

later. The idea that helping the poor will bring rewards in the future, in conjunction with directly helping God, is to encourage Christians to be generous towards the poor.

The concept of action over mere faith is important here. John 3:17-18 emphasizes that action speaks volumes: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”<sup>48</sup> It is not enough to live with the poor; one must *do* something to serve them. Most of the verses cited here regard action. The Bible tells Christians to lend, to give, to invite, to defend, to be kind, and in general, to help. It uses examples of what people can do for the poor – not just what they can believe about the poor. This comes up later in the teachings of leaders of the evangelical left. The left encourages these same actions found in the Bible: giving, defending, helping. This is part of what makes it a compelling and consequential movement. Whereas faith is largely private, action has the potential to become public, materializing in politics and society. This emphasis on action also makes the argument distinctly political. Voting in certain ways and enacting certain policies are examples of political actions people can take to display their faith. Again, the Bible shows that it matters not if one believes something, but if one acts on that – today, we can act through politics.

Law. She evaluates tax policy reform from the perspective of Judeo-Christian ethics and makes the case that if the U.S. based tax policy on the Bible, society as a whole would benefit. Her ideas are driven by the fact that Christian ideas about wealth and poverty necessarily go hand in hand. Members of the evangelical left set forth the idea that to carry out the Bible's teachings, Christians must stop focusing so hard on accumulating wealth. Hamill claims that the Bible's teachings "clearly indicate that some extremes of wealth accumulation are unjust."<sup>49</sup> Beyond being frowned upon, it is a threat to justice to accumulate so much wealth. Since we see from the Bible that God has a preference for the poor and frequently commands the rich to help them, in conjunction with the overarching topic of her paper, we see that Hamill's assertion of justice is biblically grounded. Hamill tries to appeal to Judeo-Christian citizens by using their own language. As Hamill strives for a tax reform that creates more justice in the U.S., she looks to the Bible – which so many Americans claim to follow – as a source of this call for justice. In the eyes of Judeo-Christians, her use of biblical values strengthens her argument for tax policy reform.

To assist the needy, one must recognize the wrong in amassing extreme amounts of wealth. Hamill claims that "the fundamental moral principle of Judeo-Christian ethics [states] that those who have been given much have greater moral obligations to carry out God's work on earth" and that they must "use their material blessings to further God's purposes rather than exclusively their own purposes."<sup>50</sup> This shows an inequality of responsibility based on an inequality of wealth: once one has amassed more "material blessings" than others, they carry a

poverty and the poor, much is also said about the perspective and responsibility of the rich. Her appeal is largely to the rich who choose to hoard their wealth instead of give it away. She encourages these people to use their blessings to further God's work rather than solely their own interests. This appeal is in keeping with the messages of the Bible which clearly emphasize the importance of using one's fortune for good.

The idea that accumulation of wealth is dangerous reflects the fear of worshipping money over God. Among the most prominent verses in the Bible – on money and in general – is Matthew 6:24 which states that “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” This verse implores Christians to choose which “master” they will serve, God or money, implying that a true Christian will choose to serve God and thus follow what He says about acquiring wealth. It does not necessarily ask Christians to choose between loving God and *having* money; it simply implores them not to equate the two or place such a large premium on wealth that it takes from their faith. Sider expands on this central verse, saying that “An abundance of possessions can easily lead us to forget that God is the source of all good. We trust in ourselves and our wealth rather than in the Almighty.”<sup>51</sup> Importantly, we must not confuse the cause and effect Sider offers. The cause is wealth and the effect is forgetting God's power – not the other way around. Forgetting God does not lead us to amass wealth, but once we have amassed wealth, we are at risk of serving it over God. Christians who follow this verse closely are wary of becoming too money-obsessed. They know that the Bible teaches that those who neglect the poor are, first, not serving God's wishes, and second, will not be so fortunate in heaven as they had been on earth. Moreover, wealth and the process of accumulating it can lead

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Sider, 122.

us to prioritize that over all else, including serving God. Sider aims to remind Christians of this and encourages them to look back to Scripture for guidance on how to deal with wealth.

Once Christians are clear on prioritizing God over money, the next step is reasoning why they should go even further and help the poor. There are many different arguments for how Christians should view the poor, and many different rationales for why. Among these is the idea that Christians should help the poor simply because it is right. Hamill notes that “Individuals enjoying higher levels of income and wealth who fail to support tax policy reflecting Judeo-Christian values are implicitly assuming that their own efforts rather than God’s grace produced their wealth, and therefore are not acting consistent with genuine faith.”<sup>52</sup> Her notion of “tax policy reflecting Judeo-Christian va



giving to the poor is a necessity of carrying out the Christian faith. These claims about how to treat a society's poor make the case that helping the poor is the proper way to act with Christian faith and it is simply right.

The command to help the poor is an explicit, recurring, and central aspect of the Bible. The New Testament's many stories about Jesus in regard to wealth and poverty inform what faith looks like. Hamill writes that "In his teachings regarding wealth, Jesus Christ directly commands that real faith requires God to have absolute priority over everything else, especially money."<sup>54</sup> The language here is strong: Jesus did not *suggest*, he *commanded*. He did not claim God should be important, he said God should have *absolute priority*. Jesus saw wealth as a central facet of Christianity. This suggests that those claiming to act in his name should aim to see past money in order to be closer with God. Further, Mary Jo Bane, a political scientist, makes the claim that "What is undeniable about Jesus' life and teachings [...] is that they exemplify a radical identification with and compassion for the poor."<sup>55</sup> Again, the language here leaves no room for misinterpretation. We see this in the aforementioned Bible passages which exemplify Jesus' identification with the poor. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas similarly argues that following in Jesus' footsteps is "the first task of Christian ethics."<sup>56</sup> He emphasizes that followers of Christ should "form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence."<sup>57</sup>

notes that “when God wanted to save the world, he selected slaves, prostitutes, and sundry other disadvantaged folk”<sup>58</sup> to do so. This shows that, beyond caring for the poor, God actually has preference for them over others. Sider goes on to defend God’s “overwhelming bias for the poor”<sup>59</sup> by describing why it is that the rich are second to the poor. He writes, “We will acknowledge in fear and trembling that the God of the Bible wreaks horrendous havoc on the rich. But it is not because he does not love rich persons. It is because the rich regularly oppress the poor and neglect the needy.”<sup>60</sup> He clarifies that it is nothing inherent in the rich that God

Whole Bible teaches. Its focus on poverty and the poor reveals that, in order to be the best society possible, we necessarily must focus on the so-called least among us. Wallis argues that “We must learn to perceive ‘the poor’ not as a problem to be overcome but as precious resources that have been ignored – people who have gifts and talents that would extend and enrich the community once they are permitted to sit as friends and neighbors in the circles of our lives.”<sup>61</sup> Here, Wallis uses the idea of utility to make the case for helping the poor. Though society treats them as a problem, as he says, they actually have talents and gifts that have the potential to benefit an entire community – if only we could see the poor for their potential rather than for their inconvenience, we’d all be better off. This line of thinking might appeal more to the non-religious or the politically- and economically-based thinkers (in addition to some religiously-based thinkers), but, for Wallis, such values are firmly centered within a Christian framework.

Wallis writes that “The biblical prophets say that a society’s integrity is judged, not by its wealth and power, but by how it treats its most vulnerable members.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Wallis simultaneously refutes the idea that wealth and power are to be coveted and brings up the idea that we should focus on the vulnerable. He builds upon the idea that helping the poor is the *right* thing to do by claiming that it is also the *best* thing to do for the good of the whole society. The basis for his argument is that, “from a moral viewpoint, those at the bottom are the litmus test for the health of the whole society. That is both a religious insight and the beginning of political wisdom.”<sup>63</sup> Helping the poor helps society. The society is only as strong as its weakest link, so the proverbial stronger links must do their part in strengthening the most vulnerable. To do this, he tells Christians to “listen to them, pay attention to them, and even evaluate our success as a

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Wallis, “Faith Works.”

Wallis, “God’s Politics,” 236.

Wallis, “Faith Works.”

society by how we treat them.”<sup>64</sup> Once we have done this, God will judge us better as a society – and, beyond that, we will actually *be* a better society. Since evangelicals are focused on God’s judgment in regard to salvation, this appeals to them; Wallis gives a biblical perspective and a non-biblical perspective on this so as to reach the widest possible audience. His words do not evoke pity or superiority, but love and compassion. His encouragement to forgo some riches in the interest of others is substantiated by the claim that this also constitutes acting for oneself.

Such ideas about wealth, poverty, and treatment of the poor have political implications. Politicians and lawmakers are individuals, some Christian, who have individual morals and ideas about responsibility. Though neither in direct conversation with him nor coming from the same background as he does, Hamill corroborates Gerson’s idea of public service being an avenue through which to carry out one’s true faith. She aims to use the secular – U.S. government – to enforce a religious perspective that will benefit society. She writes of the constitutionality of policymakers acting in their faith: “no serious scholar contends that the Establishment Clause forbids policymakers from making public policy decisions primarily motivated by their personal religious moral values when adequate secular grounds also support the decision.”

especially from the wealthiest and most powerful members of the community, tax policy is one of the most important barometers measuring the authenticity of a community claiming to be people of God.”<sup>66</sup> We do not often equate tax policy and God’s will, but Hamill argues that tax policy is a good way to measure true Christianity in a given community. Considering the emphasis the Bible places on helping the poor, it makes sense that policy regarding what of one’s wealth one must give away (in some capacity) is a strong measurement of “authenticity,” as she puts it. Hamill’s work on this matter legitimates the idea that it is not only possible, but *necessary*, to use one’s faith when working with the public sphere.

Scholars and members of the evangelical left are eager to bring the Bible's heavy emphasis on poverty to the forefront of the conversation on Christianity in society. In "God is Still Not a Republican or a Democrat," Wallis writes the following:

the ways in which a few conservative evangelical leaders have allowed their political ideology to trump fidelity to the whole witness of the Bible is dismaying. When we hear some proclaim that voting 'biblical values' only means voting against abortion and same-sex marriage, we wonder what Bible they are reading. Apparently, not the one in our hands — the one with 2,000 verses about the poor and marginalized, injunctions to regard the earth as God's precious gift to us that we must carefully steward, and appeals to the efficacy of peacemaking rather than an idolatrous trust in military might — all values that come from the Scriptures.<sup>67</sup>

He points out the irony present in the discussion of biblical values in politics: poverty has a larger presence in the Bible than do abortion and same-sex marriage, yet these are the issues associated with "biblical voting." He draws our attention to the point that there are thousands of Bible verses about the poor and marginalized, yet that is far from the forefront of political thought when put in conversation with religion. This is the basis of Wallis and the evangelical left's conception of what should be weighted most heavily in the Bible.

For both the evangelical left and right, the Bible transcends abstract theology. Supplementing what to *believe*, it also has something to say about how to *act*, and this includes action not merely within religious venues but also within the world of society and politics. Practicing the Bible is both about improving Christians' understandings of the Bible and improving society at large. More specifically, evangelicals believe that once people start living

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Wallis, "God is Not a Republican or a Democrat."

out the true Whole Bible, they will infuse biblical values more thoroughly into society – thus making it better and more moral. Interestingly, this is something that both the evangelical left and right agree on: it is their job to deepen the extent to which biblical values are present in society. The two groups share this core value, but it has manifested itself in distinct ways for each. The idea of biblical values, especially in conjunction with American society, has been dominated by the Christian right. They have advocated for certain values to be prioritized in policy on religious grounds, prominently matters of abortion and sexuality. The difference between the evangelical left and right lies in what each group finds to be most important.

A main tenet of the evangelical left is the concept of action. Wallis emphasizes this point: it is not enough to have faith in one's heart, a true Christian must also act on their faith. If we

ignore the energy that has placed policy making at the center of its activism efforts. Politicians, preachers, and laypeople alike have been outspoken about the need for biblical values in the United States, thus causing Americans to believe that this embodies only those biblical values



up to their Christianity both follow Jesus strictly and preach his teachings to others. When any number of Christians then join each other in community, “the multiplied impact of these lives begins to permeate the institutions, communities, and nations in which they are found.”<sup>71</sup> Since, with the adoption of this new way of doing religion, so many more people will be Christians – and truer Christians, at that – Christianity will permeate every sphere of society. It will become impossible to separate Christians from their religion and Christianity from society, but not in the way we perceive this today.

With the evangelical left’s Bible in practice in the U.S., things will look different. Christian political philosopher Jim Skillen prepares us for this change, writing in Gushee’s “Christians and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars” that “Just as the disestablishment of the church three hundred years ago meant the partial disestablishment of one type of political order by another, so the establishment of true pluralism in areas such as education and welfare services, for example, will mean the partial disestablishment of our present political system by another.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, the shift from our current political system to a future political system in which religion impacts policy will be no small change. Skillen claims that the political order he recommends is a good one “because it does justice to religious diversity and to the diverse range of social institutions.”<sup>73</sup> Bringing an array of religious perspectives – including the evangelical left perspective that helping the poor is central to carrying out the word of God – is the most just way of doing politics in the United States. In order to bring this justice to our politics, we must be ready to make a substantial change in our current system.

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Ibid

The shift we will see uproots much of our current system because it necessitates a complete change in the way we view the wealth gap. Sider writes that “Over and over again God commanded his people to live together in community in such a way that they would avoid extremes of wealth and poverty.”<sup>74</sup>

in one of the central priorities of the evangelical right. This viewpoint recognizes that there are a multitude of factors that go into preserving and protecting life, and alleviating poverty is one of them. But it does not adopt poverty relief in lieu of relaxation on abortion. Sider and this ethic show that differences in priority on the evangelical right and left are not irreconcilable; rather, it is possible and efficient to combine central aspects of each to create one more consistent value of Christianity, that being the preservation of life. This is crucial to note when thinking about the probability of bringing forth this practice of the Whole Bible, and convincing existing Christians to accept it. If the left's proposed ideology and practice share common ground with the right, their attempt at bringing about this change will be more fruitful.

Another point of confluence between the evangelical and left and right is the potential value of capitalism as a vehicle of economic justice. In other words, capitalism is also here to stay in the revised world of the evangelical left's Bible. In the introduction to *Wealth and Justice*, Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religion at Baylor University, discusses Wallis and his Bible full of holes. He claims that "For Wallis, the answer [to how to help the poor] lies in state intervention and socialist policies of wealth redistribution."<sup>76</sup> However, Jenkins, a right-leaning evangelical, claims that capitalism is a better way to go about helping the poor, both in terms of fulfilling the Bible's mission and effectively alleviating poverty. According to Jenkins, Wehner, Brooks, and other evangelicals, "Historical experience leaves not the slightest doubt of the superiority of free-enterprise capitalism as the best means of helping the poor—or rather, of making them self-sufficient, so that they no longer need help" and that "in terms of effectiveness, in terms of fulfilling the Biblical mission to raise the poor, the system [of capitalism] has no

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Wehner et al.

equal.”<sup>77</sup> Again, we see here that the mission of the evangelical left and right are compatible. Jenkins sets forth the idea that we should be prioritizing helping the poor, as the left promotes, and that the existing system of capitalism is the best way to do this. While Wallis did propose other ideas such as government intervention and wealth redistribution, Jenkins lays out a claim proposing alternative ideas for helping the poor. The discrepancy, however, suggests that a conversation between the left and right on capitalism and poverty is necessary to moving forward in regard to an ecumenical movement to achieve economic justice. Capitalism is a long-standing tradition of both American society and Christianity in general, particularly Protestantism, so this conversation will not be completely smooth. This is another instance of a serious shift society will need to make in certain ideologies in order to live out the Whole Bible.

In this reformed evangelicalism, the focus of Christianity will be different. This is the central point of living out the Whole Bible. Michael Cromartie, Vice President of the Ethics & Policy Center, asks the question “On what matters should we be most concerned, and what are the most prudent ways to express such convictions?”<sup>78</sup> His framing makes it clear that we should not be asking *if* evangelicals should be involved in social and political issues but rather, *how* they should be involved. He brings up the point of priority, imploring evangelicals to decide what will be their main focus as they enter anew into the political realm. The question of priority is central to the evangelical reform movement. Cromartie’s comment brings to light the fact that the United States has spent too much time grappling over whether religion should have a role in secular society and politics that we have lost sight of *how* religion should be involved. In

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Ibid.  
Gushee, 27.

carrying out the evangelical left's conception of the Bible, the focus will be less on the question of "if" and more on the question of "how."

Though members of the evangelical right and left are in agreement on the "if" – that religion should inform politics – their beliefs about the "how" are less synchronized. The evangelical right prioritizes pelvic issues. They see these issues as the primary topic of Christianity, so they are at the center of their evangelizing. The left, on the other hand, sees poverty and treatment of the poor as the center of Christianity, so in their lived-out vision, it is poverty that will be Christians' focus. Despite their partial agreement on issues such as abortion, these differing camps of evangelicals differ significantly in the way they prioritize what they understand as basic biblical values. The left is not seeking out ways to convince fellow Christians that the Bible teaches people to help the poor, but they are rather seeking out ways to put this concept at the forefront of evangelicalism. This means that upon enacting the left's vision, there will be no fundamental change in belief. Both sides of evangelicalism agree on much of the *content* of the Bible, even if not all of its implications. The right needs only to shift their priorities from pelvic issues to poverty issues and the left will be on their way to practicing the Whole Bible.

The implementation of the Whole Bible extends specifically to the political world. It is to manifest in general and specific ways which Christian leaders delineate. Both religiously-oriented people and politically-oriented people are in need of convincing of this idea that the true argument should be about the specific ways in which Christianity can and should be involved with politics. Leaders of the evangelical left, right, and center aim to convince such Christians that their faith must expand to all that they do, including in the public sphere. Skillen aims to do this convincing, explaining that "Political life belongs to human beings and it thereby falls under

the authority of the King of Kings.”<sup>79</sup> Since God is in charge of the entire world, God is necessarily related to political life. He is interested in anything human beings do, and human

what Jesus would have us do. At the same time, it puts the whole society in a better financial position. Hamill concludes, and evangelical left leaders would agree, that such a reform of tax policy would show that Christian leaders and citizens are truly living out the Whole Bible and God's word.

In addition to concrete policy, another part of society's reform of the conception of "evangelicalism" will manifest as more intense evangelizing. Christians will see that they are meant to carry out Jesus' teachings in every aspect of their life, so this will come across as, simply, having more religion in the public sphere. The right dominates our current idea of more religion in the public sphere. In the left's vision, the increased religiosity will look different than





ecumenism a key part of their strategy. Having a diversity of voices is central to the society the evangelical left proposes. Leaders of this movement do not suggest that one person, organization, or even philosophy will be in charge of this move to carry out the proper Bible. Rather, they all emphasize the importance of bringing diverse voices to the conversation.

Sojourners embodies ecumenism. While its leaders, Wallis and Gushee, are themselves Baptists, they identify more largely with Christianity in general. Sojourners aims to include all types of Christians in its movement. Gushee describes Sojourners as a “progressive Christian voice” that “refuse[s] to separate personal faith from social justice, prayer from peacemaking, contemplation from action, or spirituality from politics.”<sup>83</sup> Describing it as progressive suggests that the organization breaks some ties with tradition and traditional Christianity, thus alienating some Christians, but welcoming many others. Sider emphasizes the importance of ecumenism when he states that to achieve a common evangelical political philosophy, “the process must include a wide range of evangelical voices; the goal should be limited; and the engagement of major evangelical gatekeepers is indispensable.”<sup>84</sup> His aim is for a singular, agreed upon approach to politics. To achieve this, there must necessarily be a range of opinions, backgrounds, and theologies that come together to form a coherent goal for how to live out the true Bible.

This willingness to engage in ecumenical outreach to members of the evangelical right will be central to the success of evangelicalism in the U.S. Much of the conversation surrounding evangelicalism in the United States, particularly as it relates to politics and the public sphere, is about the right. Gushee describes the “subtle emergence of a robust evangelical center” as “one of the most promising developments in evangelical life today – and therefore in American public

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Gushee and Phillips.  
Gushee, 95.

life.”<sup>85</sup> The reasoning for this is that it “has the potential to break the stranglehold of partisan loyalty on Christian political engagement.”<sup>86</sup> This evangelical center provides Christians with the opportunity to adopt a religious ideology not associated with current entrenched political parties and ideas, but instead one that embraces a truer version of Christianity as it relates to politics. Of course, Gushee himself is a member of the evangelical left, so this brings even more weight to his claim. This signifies the proposed collaboration among all evangelicals to create a common philosophy. Instead of being partisan and separated, the goal is to stray from extremes and find centrality on which all sides agree.

One example of ecumenism paving the way to this Bible’s implementation is “Pentecost 2004” sponsored by Call to Renewal, a group Wallis and Sojourners convened. Wallis and hundreds of other Christian leaders congregated for three days to call attention to poverty – the full name of the event was “Pentecost 2004: Making Poverty a Religious and Electoral Issue.” The conference was ecumenical in nature and was meant to bring all types of Christian leaders together to focus on the issue of poverty. Wallis, who is described as “one of the many leaders

21st century. Regardless of the conclusions each person or group reaches, the initial gathering and acknowledgement portrays an instance of this Bible shaping action in the United States.

The grassroots, ecumenical nature of Pentecost 2004 exemplifies the agreed-upon





American evangelicalism has long focused on pelvic issues at the expense of other biblical issues such as poverty, but there are a variety of theories that explain why this might be.

In the early 20th century, Max Weber put forth the idea of the “Protestant ethic.” He believed that Protestantism was at the same time conducive to wealth accumulation and asceticism. People aimed to be wealthy in order to prove God’s favor, but they were not extravagant in their displays of wealth. Moral disapproval of excessive displays of wealth led to “The formation of capital through asceticism’s compulsive saving.”<sup>98</sup> Combined with the moral value of hard work, this conception of wealth led to the further accumulation of capital. This idea that wealth was proof of God’s favor resulted in a stigma towards those without wealth. Similarly, Weber discussed *beruf*, which translates to ‘calling, vocation, or profession’<sup>99</sup> and represents the idea that “the fulfillment of duty in vocational callings became viewed as the highest expression that moral activity could assume.”<sup>100</sup> Protestants are able to show their service and commitment to God through fulfilling their *beruf*. When one has fulfilled this calling – most often through a profession which provides them with varying levels of wealth – they know they will receive God’s grace. Conversely, one’s lack of wealth suggests a lack of grace, further stigmatizing the poor. Weber wrote that this view of wealth and poverty led to the “spirit of capitalism.” Protestants valued living a blessed life, and they saw this blessedness through accumulation and retention of wealth. While this did not directly lead to avoiding helping the poor, it did create an indifference towards the

This had lasting effects on American society. I think that the existing history of religion and capitalism's relationship led to a tie to political ideology and political party, especially in regard to money – that is, savings, charity, poverty relief, and taxation. The evangelical right led

whereas the average wealth of Black and Hispanic families is \$142,500 and \$165,500, respectively.<sup>101</sup> Further, the makeup of the evangelical Protestant cohort in the U.S. is largely white white people make up 76% of evangelical Protestants while Black and Latinx people make up only 6% and 11% of evangelical Protestants, respectively.<sup>102</sup> While correlation does not imply causation, we can see here that there is a blatant inequality between people of color and non-people of color in regard to both socioeconomic status and religion. Furthermore, Robert P. Jones, scholar of religion, culture, and politics, explains that a 2000 study of Black and white Christians shows that white evangelicals' "cultural tool kit[s]": a repertoire of shared ideas and behaviors that allow [groups] to organize and interpret reality"<sup>103</sup> consist of "tools that restricted their moral vision to the personal and interpersonal realms, while screening out institutional or structural issues."<sup>104</sup> White evangelicals will act morally as individuals – towards Black people and poor people, for example – but their philosophy does not reach the structural domain, including government and the church itself. Provided the historical context of evangelicalism as well as its connection to conservative and sometimes ultra-conservative policy, I am led to believe that there is a deeper tie to racism in evangelicalism. If evangelicals equate poverty with people of color, there is more to their hesitation to help the poor than just the Bible or the capitalist tradition. This is a part of the evangelical left and right that I did not research deeply, but continue to be interest-1 ( t82.9) -1 (d t) -2 00 ,rpeth





There is a critical distinction between support for government programs for poverty relief and individual charity. I have not put this distinction at the forefront of this paper because it was not the main focus of my research. It is, however, important to note the difference here. The Bible verses I quote are not specific about how they encourage Christians to help the poor – they simply emphasize that helping the poor, vaguely, is crucial to being a good Christian. As the Bible is a piece of literature written centuries ago, its writers could not have predicted the exact opportunities we would have in the 21st century United States to go about helping the poor. We have charities, donation systems, government programs, and various other ways of helping the poor financially. While the evangelical right’s widespread skepticism and limited “cultural tool kit” carries over to government and institutions, its members do not say much about individual donations or acts of service to the poor. This makes it potentially difficult to determine the true roots of reluctance to help the poor. While logic follows that a distrust of government would cause evangelicals to refrain from voting for policies that would increase taxation in order to help the poor, the evangelical right’s failure to address other means of doing so causes me to revisit the Weberian tradition as well as the racist inclinations present in the right from its inception. Interestingly, evangelicals on the left do not always specify the precise ways in which Christians should be helping the poor. They repeat the importance of doing so above all else, however, which leads me to believe that they are largely in favor of assistance of all kinds, be it through individual donation or supporting policies that increase poverty relief.

The past few pages have reflected many Americans’ view of evangelicalism. This is precisely why I found this paper an important one to write. Many evangelicals are trying to reform their image and their message – on both the left and right. Major news sites are replete



religion and religious people, particularly if they are not familiar with other parts of the Bible not as central to the evangelical right. The left and its leaders are working to change Americans' view of what it means for Christianity to influence politics and society with a stronger focus on helping the poor.

It might be easy for non-Christians to look at all of the harmful parts of the Bible – the racism, the sexism, the homophobia – and choose to dismiss it, as well as Christianity, as bad. American progressives might see increased use of the Bible as a detriment to a liberal society. The Bible, however, and Christianity, have been around for centuries, always influencing culture, society, and politics in various ways. Despite its many flaws and myriad interpretations, people have stood by it as a significant informant of morality. For this reason, I do not think it is productive to wish for a Bible-free, Christianity-free, wholly secular American society. Instead, I think those Americans who yearn for progressive politics, poverty alleviation, and greater freedoms would benefit from looking at the evangelical left. The left reads the same Bible as the right always has, yet it ends up with different interpretations, goals, and priorities. This shows that it may not be the Bible that holds certain harmful beliefs, but people. Similarly, it shows that the Bible is able to inform other, non-harmful beliefs – those that encourage forgoing extreme wealth, assisting the poor, and striving for a stronger and more just society. The evangelical left's recent and growing rise to prominence in the U.S. shows that we have the ability to reconcile an intersection of religion and politics for the benefit of both Christians and non-Christians. In order to understand how religion is to come into contact with the U.S. in the modern day, we must understand the ways in which it has already done so, as well as what groups, people, and ideas are leading this charge.

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