

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.”¹ 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.”² 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.”³ The idea of a Bible full of holes – in those terms or otherwise, subconsciously or otherwise – is the driving force of the evangelical left. Whereas a certain prominent vision of Christianity has placed sexuality- and gender-related issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, LGBTQ rights, and contraception at the center of the Bible, the evangelical left argues that these are neither the only nor the most prominent aspects of the Bible.

In the United States, there is a disconnect between priorities of the Bible and priorities of many of its believers; so much of the Bible is centered around poverty, yet this does not come close to dominating the religio-political conversation in the U.S. In *Rich Christians in an Age of*

¹ Wallis, “God’s Politics,” 212.

² Ibid, 212.

³ Ibid, 214.

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?”⁴ 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

⁴ Sider, 77.

specifically with your time you are not preaching the Gospel at all.”⁵ Luther sent the message that Christians cannot pick and choose which issues to preach based on convenience of any kind. They cannot preach based on a Bible full of holes, no matter what formed those holes. There are groups and individuals in the U.S. focused on preaching a Bible without holes by bringing poverty to the forefront of Christians’ minds, in terms of voting and other types of social and political activism. They speak, write, and advocate from the standpoint of what we deem the “evangelical left.” Such people encourage Christians to use a close reading of the Bible to inform their views on poverty and the poor. For the evangelical left, the message here is clear: in order to lead a truly, fully, Christian life, followers of the Bible must recognize the *entirety* of that Bible rather than focusing only on what is easiest to follow. Both sides of evangelicalism – and all interpreters of the Bible – pick and choose what parts of the Bible to most emphasize. The left’s message here, though, is that Christians cannot disregard such a prominent theme of the text in order to make it easier to carry out the proper message.

The Bible is filled with stories of charity, loving the poor, and grace. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests Christians should be cruel or indifferent towards the poor. I do not suggest that a coalition of Christians *is* cruel to the poor. Indifference, however, is another matter. Perhaps as important as *how* we treat certain issues is *what* issues we treat. Christians, again, weigh different issues unequally. The evangelical right’s focus on pelvic issues and the evangelical left’s focus on poverty issues represents a core division in contemporary Christianity.

Sider’s discussion of Sodom applies to other facets of Christianity. Why is it that Christians are more comfortable criticizing what they perceive as sexual misconduct than unconcern for the poor? Sider suggests that the answer lies in our economic self-interest: we

⁵ Ibid, 58.

want to be comfortable with being wealthy or achieving wealth, so we frame certain sins as worse than others. His bringing readers' attention to this matter brings to light the evangelical left's point that many Christians need to re-evaluate their priorities and discern what is *actually* sinful as opposed to what they *choose to believe* is sinful. Christians have the ability to re-choose and reshape what parts of the Bible get attention. The evangelical left aims to make treatment of the poor the number one priority. I explore this theology of poverty that members of the evangelical left deem the heart of the Bible. I will refer to the evangelical left's Bible as the "Whole Bible," in contrast to the "Bible full of holes," with the realization that all Bibles are filled with holes in some sense, as people choose to ignore or underemphasize parts of them, and that the "Whole Bible" I speak of is likely not whole itself, for the same reason. I also explore the way this thinking translates into specific efforts to reorient American Christians' actions and activism in regard to the poor. Members of the evangelical left differ in their backgrounds, reasonings, and methods, but they are bound together by the goal of bringing poverty to the forefront of Christian thought. In this paper, I discuss the importance and impact of the evangelical left's growing prominence in the U.S., using its history and beliefs to inform where it fits into American and Christian society.

II. Background

The late theologian James Cone explains that "one's social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to this question."⁶ This rings true in studying the evangelical right and the evangelical left. Both groups have long histories in the United States, and both find themselves in certain spotlights – largely

⁶ Cone, 14.

political spotlights – in today’s society. One could argue that the Christian right has existed for centuries as a product of early-American Puritanism, which focused on matters of purity, sin, and grace – focuses similar to those of today’s Christian right, as I will detail more below. One could also argue that the Christian left has existed for centuries, surfacing specifically in such periods as the Enlightenment, the Social Gospel – which focused on issues including poverty, inequality, labor rights, and racial tensions and played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement – and the New Deal. Christianity has always been a prominent part of American culture. Its manifestations in society have shifted and evolved over time. In the contemporary world, we see the evangelical right and left touching different parts of society and politics. In order to understand the goings-on of these groups today, one needs first to understand the issues pertinent to them at the time of their emergence and rise to prominence.

While the evangelical right has a long history in the United States, the right as we know it today emerged in the 1970s in the wake of the social upheavals of the 1960s, and in response to a series of Supreme Court cases. Paul Weyrich, a conservative political activist, found an opportunity to advance religious conservatism in the decades following World War II. During this time, evangelicals had become more closely aligned with the political right, but they “had largely stayed out of the political arena, at least in any organized way.”⁷ At first, though evangelicals and Republicans overlapped on particular issues such as restricted access to abortion and restricted LGBTQ rights, there was no overt concerted effort to intertwine them more closely. Weyrich felt as though if he could change this: “[evangelicals’] large numbers would constitute a formidable voting bloc—one that he could easily marshal behind conservative

⁷ Balmer.

causes.”⁸ 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 status. Many evangelical leaders were angry about this ruling and argued that it obstructed the functioning of religious schools, as some of them did not accept Black students. Rather than framing the evangelical argument in terms of defending racial segregation, evangelical leaders Weyrich and Jerry Falwell framed it in terms of religious freedom. After the onset of the Civil Rights Act, specifically Title VI which states that “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance,”⁹ such leaders began to face additional hurdles. Balmer writes, “For decades, evangelical leaders had boasted that because their educational institutions accepted no federal money (except for, of course, not having to pay taxes) the government could not tell them how to run their shops.”¹⁰ However, the new Civil Rights Act changed this, necessarily intertwining government and religious institutions. The national push for racial integration proved to be the catalyst for the deepened evangelical alignment with the political right.

Abortion compounded the momentum that the emerging evangelical right was experiencing. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* ruled in favor of protecting a woman’s right to have an abortion. This decision got the public talking about abortion, including evangelical leaders

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Title VI, Civil Rights Act of 1964.

¹⁰ Balmer.

(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."¹¹ 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

¹¹ Ibid.

and people of color.¹² 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 more prominent pelvic issues we see at its core today. Almost from its inception, members of this movement have chosen to focus on "pelvic issues" rather than others more central to the Bible and its teachings. The evangelical right never made wealth, poverty, or the poor a main focus of its mission. While it did not actively take an anti-poor stance, neither did it take a pro-poor stance – the right simply did not acknowledge such issues, despite their having to do with both religion and politics. Provided its origins with regard to race and segregation, as well as the significance of the fact that many poor people in the U.S. are Black, it is reasonable to believe that there is a connection here. Racism likely had something to do with the evangelical right's initial disregard for the poor. Regardless of the exact reason for this, understanding the fact that the right did not acknowledge the importance of poverty and the poor is the first step in

¹² Ibid.

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”¹³ 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,¹⁴ showcasing that not all evangelicals are aligned with the political right. Further, another 2014 survey shows that while 62% of adults in the South report religion being “very important” to them, roughly the same portion are Democrats as are Republicans.¹⁵ The Christian left is part of a long American tradition of social justice, and the evangelical left is seeing a renewed energy in the 21st century.

The term “evangelical” as it is used today was “born out of fundamentalism,”¹⁶ by which I mean a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible. This history results in our tendency to associate evangelicalism with religious and political conservatism. The evangelical left has had to contend with this misunderstanding. Brantley Gasaway, Professor of Religion at Bucknell University, explains that evangelicals are devoted to “(1) the primary authority of the Bible; (2) the necessity of spiritual rebirth (conversion) through personal faith in Christ's atonement for one's sins; and (3) activism in spreading ‘the good news’ (evangel) of Christ's redemptive

¹³ Williams.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, “Political Ideology.”

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, “Adults in the South.”

¹⁶ Miller.

work,”¹⁷ all of which suggest a theological conservatism. However, he makes the distinction that “theological conservatism does not necessarily entail political conservatism.”¹⁸ 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 *Sojourners*, a religious publication “committed to social justice and peace.” It boasts a following that “work[s] together to live a gospel life that integrates spiritual renewal and social justice.”¹⁹ This group and this publication is ecumenical and diverse in nature, brought together by its shared evangelical vision and mission. Its leader and founder, Wallis, emphasizes poverty in the Bible, particularly stressing in his work that Christians have strayed from the Bible’s focus on the poor and instead give too much attention to pelvic issues which are neither as prominent nor as important. It is this thinking that serves as the basis of the discourse and activism of today’s evangelical left.

The progressive policies of the evangelical left are seeing a renewed popularity in the 21st century. Many argue that progressive evangelicalism is on the rise.²⁰ More liberal Christians are using their faith to inform their politics, and doing so aggressively. Faith is an all-important aspect of evangelical Protestantism and has been since the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s theory of *sola fide*, or salvation by faith alone, laid the groundwork for faith being the basis of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sojourners, “About.”

²⁰ Gasaway.

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,”²¹ 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 religio-political conversation once dominated by the evangelical right, as well as a society whose values increasingly align closely with its own.

Interestingly, 9/11 marks a moment that inspired some members of the evangelical left to become more active in carrying their faith into their work. Michael Gerson, former Chief Speechwriter for President George W. Bush, recounts his time in the White House on 9/11, remembering how the attacks marked a turning point for him and his colleagues. He writes, “This event underscored for us, in a way nothing else really could, that we had obligations not as individuals but as public servants.”²² This comment evokes the Bible’s message that faith alone is not enough to be a good Christian, but one must also show faith through actions. Gerson is not speaking about wealth or poverty here. He is speaking specifically about his thoughts on what to do in the aftermath of these terrorist attacks, but also more generally about how, as a Christian, to go about one’s role as a public servant.

Gerson has always been an evangelical and a Republican, indicating an alignment with the evangelical right. The shift he discusses here, however, shows an evolution in his religious

²¹ Miller.

²² Gerson, 34.

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 the church's job to be masters of policy areas like welfare and immigration policy – this is the responsibility of “individual Christian laypeople.”²³ Rather, he argues, the role of the church is to “provide individual Christians with a moral framework through which they can work out their duties as citizens and engage the world in a thoughtful way.”²⁴ He urges the church to refrain from “instruct[ing] them on how to do their job or on which specific public policies they ought to embrace”²⁵ but rather to trust that if they lay the basis for strong morals and values, individuals will carry out Christian faith publicly and properly. This relationship goes both ways: the church must teach, but the people must also take these lessons and use them. Gerson's analysis of how 9/11 changed his perspective on this serves as a starting point for other Christians to recognize their moral obligation to act in God's name in their public life as well as their private life.

In addition to its differing ethical and political emphases, the Christian left is also very different demographically as compared with the evangelical right. No conversation about the history of the evangelical left would be complete without mention of the Black church, which has been central to the Christian left throughout American history. During the era of Jim Crow and in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Black Christians drew on biblical themes to make the case for racial equality. Such discourse attracted many white

²³ Ibid, 36.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

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?”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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 of theology in the light of the black Church and what that means in a society dominated by white people.”²⁸ We cannot separate race from religion in the sense that race is central to identity as well as central to religion itself. For this reason, Black Christianity has taken on a different form than other Christian theologies; it includes concepts of race, oppression, and liberation at its core.

Yet, despite its unique history and theology, Black Theology emphasizes the poor and the oppressed in a manner similar to other liberal Christian groups. The Black Church emphasizes

²⁶ Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.].

²⁷ Cone, 3.

²⁸ Ibid, 4.

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."²⁹ 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."³⁰ That Christians could ignore such a core aspect of Jesus' identity, life, and story is a foreign concept to Black Christianity, as is it to today's evangelical left. Black Christians have always focused on the importance of the oppressed in the Bible. This is the primary focus of the evangelical left as well, showing that the two groups share fundamental similarities.

Also like the evangelical left, Black theologians like Cone emphasize that the Bible does not merely teach theology, it provides a guide for how to fully live out Christianity. In speaking of Jesus' resurrection, he explains that "The politics of the resurrection is found in its gift of freedom to the poor and helpless. Being granted freedom while they are still poor, they can know that their poverty is a contrived phenomenon, traceable to the rich and the powerful in this world."³¹ The Bible is clear in its message that Jesus showed preference and partiality to the oppressed. This might mean those of certain races or skin color, and this might mean the poor and downtrodden; it likely means both. Cone and other Black Christians have for so long emphasized the centrality of the oppressed in the Bible, Jesus' teachings, and Christianity at large. I suggest that this places them within the history of the evangelical left, just a more specific faction of it.

²⁹ Ibid, 31.

³⁰ Ibid, 117.

³¹ Ibid, 115.

It is paramount to recognize that the Christian left did not emerge as an antithesis to the Christian right, nor did the Christian right emerge as an antithesis to the Christian left. Both show that different interpretations of the Bible – and more importantly, the different emphases readers place on different parts of it – have led to both agreement and disagreement among Christians, and have led to differing alignments with political values. Williams writes that “the ‘Christian left versus Christian right’ discussion is itself limiting [...] we must ask more broadly what the religious left can do collaboratively to affect change in American political discourse.”³² The left and right are fundamentally part of one group – that is, Christians. While neither side aims to clash with the other, they do nonetheless. Their diverging priorities explain much of this. Despite sharing similarities in policy, the left and right diverge in both priority and practice. Whereas the evangelical right has chosen to focus on pelvic issues from its very beginning, the evangelical left gives more attention to poverty.

III. Biblical Reasoning for Helping the Poor

Today’s leaders of the evangelical left work to make treatment of the poor Christians’ main focus. They put forth a variety of arguments for why Christians should see poverty as the central biblical issue and why they should act on this teaching. At the heart of such advocacy is, of course, the text of the Bible itself: the evangelical left uses specific Bible passages, stories about Jesus, and recurring themes to lay out how Christians should act. The Bible is filled with passages about helping the poor. Such passages can be separated into four categories: displays of God’s preference for the poor, general commands to help the poor, claims that helping the poor helps God and Jesus, and claims that helping the poor helps the one helping. The former two are

³² Williams.

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;"³³ Proverbs 19:17 "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done;"³⁴ and Proverbs 21:13 "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered."³⁵ 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"³⁶ 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.'"³⁷ These suggest that God gives more generously to the poor than to the rich, as showcased in His filling the hungry with food. Notably, this giving is to happen in heaven rather than on earth. God's generosity to the poor does not occur as they are experiencing poverty during their lives, but rather, after they have lived a life in poverty and made it to the afterlife. The generosity depicted in such verses indicates that the Bible is guiding society on how they should be treating the poor if they are to act in the ways that God will. God is the one who prefers the poor, but He calls on

³³ Holy Bible: New International Version

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

other humans to help them overcome poverty – God Himself is not the one to do this directly. These verses also show Jesus’ preference as he specifies that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor. This is corroborated in James 2:5: “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”³⁸ Just as Cone asserts about God’s particular concern for those who are oppressed, God does not simply tolerate or accept the poor equally to the rich, He prefers them. He chooses them as heirs and continually shows that despite their suffering on earth, they will get preferential treatment in heaven. These verses are just some of many that show God’s partiality towards the poor.

Building upon the demonstrated preference for the poor, the Bible consistently provides general commands to help the poor. Leviticus holds many such commands, including the following: Leviticus 19:9-10 “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God;”³⁹ Leviticus 19:15 “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly;”⁴⁰ and Leviticus 25:35-36 “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you.”⁴¹ These verses command Christians to consistently go the extra mile to make things easier for those in need. Leaving grapes for the poor instead of taking them for oneself, judging one’s

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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"⁴² 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."⁴³ 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,"⁴⁴ 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.'"⁴⁵ 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.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 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* motivation of the Bible, of evangelical Christianity, or of evangelical Christians; however, many Bible verses suggest that this is one motivational aspect of the general call to help the poor. The Bible repeatedly shows that those who help the poor will be rewarded. One example is the following passage in Luke 14:12-14: “Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’”⁴⁶ The idea of being repaid is prominent here. Whereas the host of a banquet might not be repaid on Earth if he invites the poor, God will repay him in Heaven. This passage also expands on the idea that people should put more focus on how they will be judged in the afterlife than how they live on Earth, while using their life on Earth to ensure salvation. Further, Mark 10:21 shows the story of Jesus explaining that doing good in life will come back to help one in death: “Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’”⁴⁷ Jesus frames this as an investment – give now and you will receive

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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.”⁴⁸ 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. Bible verses about God’s preference for the poor, God’s commands for people to help the poor, and God’s promise of salvation for those who help the poor make it clear that a central tenet of the Bible, and therefore Christianity, is about poverty relief. Leaders and followers of the evangelical left take this concept and apply it to their actions.

One example of a push for poverty relief through a biblical lens can be found in the writing of that of Susan Pace Hamill, Professor of Law at the University of Alabama School of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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."⁴⁹ 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."⁵⁰ This shows an inequality of responsibility based on an inequality of wealth: once one has amassed more "material blessings" than others, they carry a greater responsibility to the poor. While much of the Bible's talk about money is in regard to

⁴⁹ Hamill.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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.”⁵¹ 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

⁵¹ 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.”⁵² Her notion of “tax policy reflecting Judeo-Christian values” is such policy that is generous to the poor at a higher cost to the wealthy. Those who hoard their wealth do not act in true accordance with Christian faith. In her view, it is not right for someone who claims to have Christian ethics to oppose something that would help those in poverty, which is simply the right thing to do. Similarly, Sider implores Christians to ask “How much of my affluent lifestyle is directly related to my witnessing to rich neighbors? How much of it could I abandon for the sake of Christ’s poor and still be able to witness effectively? Indeed how much of it *must* I abandon in order to faithfully proclaim the biblical Christ who clearly taught that failure to feed the poor entails eternal damnation?”⁵³ He, like Hamill, remarks that if Christians are acting in true accordance with Christianity, they would give their money to the poor rather than keep it all for themselves. It is not mere encouragement that he provides; rather, he claims that the true question Christians must ask themselves is *how much* money to give away instead of *if* they should give it away. To Sider,

⁵² Hamill.

⁵³ Sider, 56.

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."⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷ The prevalence of these commands to help the poor make it clear what Christians need to do to truly and fully live in Jesus' name.

In *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Ron Sider asserts that much of the Bible regards wealth as a primary issue of Christianity. Further, he argues that the Bible favors the poor. He

⁵⁴ Hamill.

⁵⁵ Bane, 25.

⁵⁶ Hauerwas in Gerson, 26.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

notes that “when God wanted to save the world, he selected slaves, prostitutes, and sundry other disadvantaged folk”⁵⁸ 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”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ He clarifies that it is nothing inherent in the rich that God dislikes; rather, His disdain is a result of their actions. In the Bible, Sider explains, the rich fail to follow God’s orders to help the poor, and this results in God punishing them. When applied to the world outside of the Bible, we can see how Sider and the left use this as a basis for how to think about ungenerous wealthy people.

Similarly to Sider, Wallis also views Christianity through the lens of wealth, but his interpretation of the Bible often leads him to make a broader argument, focusing on the point that helping the poor is for the good of a whole community. Whereas Sider focuses on using the Bible for the purpose of direct economic reform, Wallis uses it to encourage a reshaping of Christianity on a more individual level. Both are involved with the secular, Sider’s involvement being through government and Wallis’s being through society. This shows that each leader aims to find utility of the Bible in different areas of non-religious society. Much of Wallis’s teaching and preaching is based on the idea that the Bible tells Christians to be good to the poor. However, he also argues that helping the poor helps everybody in a society. While it may be tempting to view this as a deviation from strict theology, this is actually the precise lesson the

⁵⁸ Sider, 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 84.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 77.

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.”⁶¹ 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.”⁶² 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.”⁶³ 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

⁶¹ Wallis, “Faith Works.”

⁶² Wallis, “God’s Politics,” 236.

⁶³ Wallis, “Faith Works.”

society by how we treat them.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ Provided that there is also a secular purpose, it is entirely appropriate and constitutional for one to act with religious faith in mind when creating poverty-related policy. Her work, in addition to that of Gerson and Wallis, show that it is possible and probable to use the religious and the secular in conjunction with one another in order to carry out the Bible’s call to help the poor and therefore improve a given society. Hamill even goes further to state that acting in this way might actually be necessary for upholding one’s faith: “Because of the real economic sacrifices required,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hamill.

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.”⁶⁶ 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 theologians consistently point to the Bible to make the point that Christians have a responsibility to help the poor. They offer a series of ways this help might become manifest in society: through tax policy, through faith-informed public service, and through sacrificing riches to aid those in need, for example. Specific Bible verses show God’s commands to help the poor. Advocates of the Whole Bible point to these, directly and indirectly, to strengthen their points about how to live out the Bible in society. Such leaders also emphasize the many different people and groups that assistance to the poor would benefit. These include not only the poor but also the rich, as well as society at large. By citing the Bible itself and explaining how its teachings on wealth and poverty have the potential to benefit society, these scholars and theologians make the case for implementing true biblical values into Americans’ lives and livelihoods.

IV. What It Would Look Like to Live Out the “Whole Bible”?

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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.⁶⁷

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

⁶⁷ 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 believe that we should help the poor but do not vote and act in such a way that helps the poor, faith is meaningless. One cannot claim to be a true Christian, in Wallis's view, when one does not actively carry out Jesus' teachings. "As the biblical apostle James put it many years ago," Wallis writes, "'Faith without works is dead.' Indeed, faith shows itself in works – faith works."⁶⁸ This is the primary change Wallis and the evangelical left wish to see in society and politics: a true manifestation of what Christians claim to believe in their hearts. A world that works according to the accurate Christian Bible will emphasize the importance of good works and will carry out their inner faith with outward expressions of it.

One of the characteristics of the evangelical right that has earned it so much of its current notoriety is the intense policy advocacy it has done in the name of biblical values. Though it has had uneven success in pushing for policies aimed at restricting access to abortion, contraceptives, and same-sex marriage, and bolstering the right to exercise one's religion, it is impossible to

⁶⁸ Wallis, "Faith Works."

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 that they emphasize. What many understand to be a religiously-influenced society is largely limited to the evangelical right's vision of society. This society is biblically-oriented, with the right's view of Christianity seeping into all corners. André Gagné, Professor of Theological Studies at Concordia University, writes, "The agenda of the Christian right can be summed up essentially as promoting the idea of a Christian nationalism in which the establishment of Judeo-Christian 'values' is the foundation of the country's law."⁶⁹ The left is looking to change what these values are. To carry out their goal of making it a priority for Christians in the U.S. to help the poor, they first must make it clear not only that this is a central biblical value, but that people must act on their faith.

Jesus is the direct inspiration for much of the reform the evangelical left wishes to see. According to Christian ethicist and intellectual David P. Gushee, "Jesus knew what he was doing when he exercised his cosmic authority to establish the church and instituted evangelism and disciple making as the primary Christian strategy for transforming the world."⁷⁰ Gushee delineates what happens when someone accepts Jesus as the guiding being of their life. Upon this acceptance, Jesus is to seep into everything one does, thinks, and says. In theory, accepting Jesus and becoming a Christian should dictate every part of someone's life and being. This acceptance should also multiply, which is what Gushee indicates in his claim that Jesus was strategic in making evangelism and discipleship such a central part of Christianity. Christians who fully live

⁶⁹ Gagné.

⁷⁰ Gushee, 38-9.

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.”⁷¹ 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.”⁷² 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.”⁷³ 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.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Skillen in Gushee, 50.

⁷³ 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.”⁷⁴ We are used to a society with such extremes. Should we move away from this style of living, things will be drastically different for everyone – including those not at either extreme. The wealth gap is so present in American society and politics; living in such a way that avoids such extremes will present a significant change and challenge.

The society the left envisions is both radically different from that which we experience now and also wholly consistent with traditionally accepted evangelical priorities. It is important to recognize that in their vision, some aspects of the current evangelical worldview can and will remain the same. The evangelical right and the evangelical left are not wholly at odds with one another. If the left replaces the right’s role in leading the charge on infusing U.S. politics with biblical values, not all places where religion touches politics will change. For example, Ron Sider, a prominent figure of the evangelical left, prioritizes poverty and the poor, embodying and advocating for the Whole Bible. However, he still writes that “The absence of a consistent ethic of life leads to absurd inconsistency. Some evangelical political voices make the sanctity of human life (up to birth and just before death) the overriding issue and neglect the way poverty and smoking destroy millions. Other evangelicals point out that racism, poverty, and environmental decay all kill, yet they seem little concerned with millions of abortions each year.”⁷⁵ We see here that he is equally appalled at Christians ignoring the danger of poverty as he is at Christians ignoring the danger of abortion. His argument for a consistent ethic of life sweeps

⁷⁴ Sider, 109.

⁷⁵ Gushee, 81.

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."⁷⁶ 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

⁷⁶ Wehner et al.

equal.”⁷⁷ 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?”⁷⁸ 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

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ 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.”⁷⁹ 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 beings do politics. Skillen advances this argument by reminding people of faith that “Believers either live entirely in the vine and bear Christlike fruit in all of life, or they become dead branches. Life is whole, of one piece. We who claim to believe in Jesus Christ should be bearing fruit in all areas of our lives in keeping with the life of the vine, or we should expect to be cut off.”⁸⁰ Essentially, he is saying that if a believer does not act entirely in Christ’s image, they are “dead branches” who have no business claiming faith. To prove one’s faith, one must show that faith in all areas of life – politics included.

In her analysis of tax policy guided by Judeo-Christian ethics, Hamill puts forth a specific idea of the implementation of this Bible in public policy. She comments that the way our tax policy is set up in the United States is not in line with what we would expect it to look like based on the number of citizens and lawmakers who are Jewish and Christian. Hamill concludes that “Tax policy guided by Judeo-Christian ethics raises a level of revenues that greatly exceeds the funding essential to cover the functions of the minimum state.”⁸¹ That is, it would be beneficial to the state if we were to adopt such tax policy that the Bible suggests. She calls specifically for the following changes: ensuring that the lowest levels of income brackets are free from taxation; placing modest burdens on lower ranges of middle class citizens; enforcing noticeably greater tax burdens as income climbs; maintaining a reasonable tax level at the highest levels of income at no more than fifty percent; and eliminating hidden regressive effects. While this may seem like left-leaning policy, Hamill argues that it is simply in keeping with

⁷⁹ Ibid, 46.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Hamill.

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 it does in the right's vision. This presents a particular problem for the evangelical left. Since the right has a louder voice than the left, Americans are likely to read "more religion in the public sphere" and hear "restricted abortion, contraceptives, and LGBTQ rights." The left aims to change this conception so that Americans hear "more faith-based policy, poverty relief, and generosity." Wallis puts forth his disdain for traditional evangelicalism, pointing to their warped view of the Bible. He describes it as "dismaying" and laments that Christians appear to be reading different Bibles since so many stray from the teachings on helping the poor. We have come to equate biblical values with votes against abortion and same-sex marriage, but this is not the focus of the Bible at all. Wallis encourages Christians to shift priority, not to shift opinion. He rarely discusses abortion and same-sex marriage, in the context of being for or against either. This would uproot his entire point: those issues are not at the forefront of the Bible or Christianity, and thus should not be the overwhelming issues in the realm of biblical values. This task of reshaping Americans' understanding of what "more religion in the public sphere" is to mean will be a battle for the evangelical left. What has the potential to make it easier is the fact

that the left and right largely agree in matters of opinion and need only to come together on matters of prioritization.

Bringing poverty to the forefront of Christian thought, while radical, is not too radical to be impossible or even improbable. For so long, the right has focused on other biblical values. This does not mean they do not value other parts of the Bible, though. Even as they have typically downplayed it, members of the evangelical right are indeed familiar with the idea that treatment of the poor is a major component of the Bible. Conservative Peter Wehner poses the following misunderstanding of Christianity: “‘During His ministry, Christ spoke out most often about (a) the evils of homosexuality, (b) the merits of democracy, (c) family-friendly tax cuts or (d) the danger of riches.’ It turns out that Christ said nothing about the first three and a lot about the last one. But you would never know it based on the rhetoric of many modern-day Christians – particularly politically active ones.”⁸² He agrees that wealth is a main topic of the Bible and of Jesus’ teachings. He also agrees that today’s outspoken Christians are more focused on other matters, such as homosexuality, that are less important in the Bible than money is. This agreement is the first step in carrying out the Whole Bible. Wehner is just one member of the evangelical right and does not speak for the entire group. His viewpoint, though, shows that there is potential for unity among the right and left in bringing poverty to the forefront of Christian society.

The revolutionary way in which the left’s leaders speak about a transformation of evangelism can give the impression that their Bible is wholly different from that of the right, and therefore that their way of bringing the Bible into deeper practice will be at odds with the right. Out of a recognition of this problem, prominent members of the evangelical left have made

⁸² Wehner.

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.”⁸³ 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.”⁸⁴ 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

⁸³ Gushee and Phillips.

⁸⁴ Gushee, 95.

life.”⁸⁵ The reasoning for this is that it “has the potential to break the stranglehold of partisan loyalty on Christian political engagement.”⁸⁶ 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 representing Evangelical, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Historic Peace, Black, Asian, and Latino congregations,”⁸⁷ spoke of the “good news” that “religious leaders and local communities from across the theological and political spectrum are responding to the vacuum of political leadership on poverty.”⁸⁸ Already, we see an instance of this Bible coming to fruition through action. A diverse range of individuals gathered together to discuss the same issue, all in acknowledgement that poverty is at the forefront of the Bible and should be at the forefront of Christianity in the

⁸⁵ Gushee and Phillips.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Chang.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

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 method evangelical leaders have on how to carry out the Whole Bible. It will not be one policy, one person, or some massive change of heart in Washington, D.C. that will bring about a way of doing politics according to this Bible. Rather, it will be individual Christians so moved to carry out their faith in every aspect of their life. Gushee expects that “Political change will emerge primarily from the bottom up rather than the top down: through a renewed zeal for Jesus Christ, the reform and creation of faith communities of theological and moral integrity and discipline, genuine and unforced evangelistic passion, and thoughtful training in the way of Jesus for those who become his followers.”⁸⁹ One by one, group by group, Christians in the public and private sectors, voters and lawmakers alike, will recognize their need to follow Jesus in every part of their life. This will slowly bring about the change Gushee and others wish to see. Many Christians, of course, are public servants. Skillen claims that “Biblically speaking, those who hold offices, such as government officials, church officials, parents, teachers, and others, bear genuine, God-given responsibility”⁹⁰ and that this God-given responsibility is what we are going to see when people start living out the Whole Bible. He writes that such people are called upon to “act and bear fruit, to steward creation as servants of God.”⁹¹ It is clear here that the society and the political realm that encapsulates this proper Bible will be one in which individuals take their faith and apply it to what they do as public servants in any capacity.

⁸⁹ Gushee, 39.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 47.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Evangelical leaders emphasize the idea that in a world with this Whole Bible, Christians are to make drastic and lasting change. While they agree that this change will start from the bottom up at the individual level, it will eventually need to turn into something more organized. They call for a common evangelical political philosophy. Skillen puts forth this idea, explaining that “Christian civic responsibility represents more than an obligation for each individual [...] This means developing a biblically oriented public philosophy with which to sort through and organize diverse public issues.”⁹² He and other evangelicals call for a united front among Christians involved in public issues. In a society that lives out the Whole Bible, there will be agreement among Christian leaders on how to go about certain policy issues. Skillen pushes for them to start “working and arguing together to build agreement on the many dimensions of justice [...] from a Christian point of view.”⁹³ From this grassroots level upward, Christians will grow into public servants committed to carrying out their faith in their roles.

The bottom line of evangelical leaders’ hopes and goals for society that lives out the true Whole Bible is exemplified in the following quote: “It is not an adequate response to the divine requirement [of love for the poor] if we are zealous to volunteer each Saturday at a homeless shelter but in our five days per week as a zoning official, lawyer, mayor, banker, or day-care operator we neglect to consider the cause of the poor and powerless.”⁹⁴ It is not enough to be Christian in private, or only on Sundays, or only in certain situations. One must be a Christian at all moments of their life, whether that is at work, at home, or in church. One’s faith should influence their every role, action, and decision. This is how we will come to be a society that practices the type of Bible the evangelical left knows. Ecumenism is also necessary in practicing

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 170.

the Whole Bible. The evangelical left and right share the idea that Christians need to put biblical ideas into practice. In order to make this a productive force for change, both sides need to come together around a common understanding of the Bible's main priorities. When Christians carry out the Bible's words in every facet of their life – including meaning putting aid to the poor at the forefront of their actions – we will see that the goals of the Whole Bible are being fulfilled.

V. Conclusion

When Americans think of the ways Christianity influences politics and society, we largely think of the so-called “pelvic issues” of abortion, contraception, and LGBTQ rights. Supreme Court cases including *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, and *Obergefell v. Hodges* have amplified this conception of the mixing of church and state. 63% of evangelical Protestants believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, as compared with 43% of all American adults.⁹⁵ 48% of Christians oppose or strongly oppose same-sex marriage,⁹⁶ as compared with only 33% of all American adults.⁹⁷ This skew is reflected in the ways many view Christians, Christianity, and religious influence in society. People who hold these views argue that they are rooted in the Bible, but, as I have shown in this project, they are not the only, or even the predominant, ideas the Bible holds. Yet, while I have delved into what the evangelical left and right have claimed *should* be central to their causes, I have not yet looked into *why* certain issues have and have not been at the forefront of evangelical Christianity. My research did not include an investigation of why

⁹⁵ Pew Research Center, “Views About Abortion.”

⁹⁶ Pew Research Center, “Views About Same-Sex Marriage”

⁹⁷ McCarthy.

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.”⁹⁸ 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’⁹⁹ and represents the idea that “the fulfillment of duty in vocational callings became viewed as the highest expression that moral activity could assume.”¹⁰⁰ 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 poor as they were believed to be less blessed than the wealthy.

⁹⁸ Weber, 170.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 100.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

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 the conversation about Christianity's relationship with politics for so long, and its ideas reflected this Weberian tradition as it was so aligned with the Republican party and conservatism in general. The left now challenges such conceptions of the Bible's message about wealth and poverty. As it does so, and as the idea that Christians following the Bible are obligated to help the poor gains traction, we may see a stray from the traditional Protestant ethic in practice. This is what I think we are observing in the U.S. today. The evangelical left's momentum and influence reflects an evolution of religio-political thought in regard to poverty relief. This is a shift from the Weberian idea of Protestants accumulating wealth so as to show God's grace and, in turn, showing indifference towards those without wealth because of the idea that they are not favored.

While the Protestant ethic is likely a major factor in the age-old relationship between evangelical Christianity and politics, and thus the hindrance of aid to the poor, it is far from the only factor. In studying evangelicals' hesitation to help the poor despite the Bible's repeated calls to do so, it is impossible to ignore the prominence of racism and skepticism. As I discussed in the "Background" section, racism was part of the evangelical right's emergence in the 1970s. The Bible certainly has some racist parts to it, and a radical group of Christians certainly take these parts to heart more than others do. I find the correlation between race and class, however, to be more prominent when it comes to evangelicals' hesitance to help the poor. Due to centuries of individual and institutionalized racism, people of color in general have less wealth than do white people. A 2019 survey shows that the average wealth of a white family is \$983,400

whereas the average wealth of Black and Hispanic families is \$142,500 and \$165,500, respectively.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰² 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”¹⁰³ consist of “tools that restricted their moral vision to the personal and interpersonal realms, while screening out institutional or structural issues.”¹⁰⁴ 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 interested in. Race and racism are crucial to consider in any study of poverty and any study of the tie between religion and politics, as is evangelical hesitancy to extend their morality towards larger, structural realms.

¹⁰¹ Bhutta et al.

¹⁰² Pew Research Center, “Racial and Ethnic Composition.”

¹⁰³ Jones, 97.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Another potential factor in traditional evangelical resistance to prioritizing helping the poor is a distrust of institutions and a skepticism of government. Evangelicals are traditionally a skeptical group. Data from 2021 shows that “nearly three-quarters of white evangelical Republicans believe widespread voter fraud took place in the 2020 election,”¹⁰⁵ “white evangelicals are much more skeptical of the Covid-19 vaccine and are less likely than other Americans to get it,”¹⁰⁶ and only 28% of evangelical Christians “accept [the] view [that] human activity contributed to the Earth’s warming.”¹⁰⁷ Historian Mark Noll has written somewhat radically about the “evangelical mind,” or in his view, the lack thereof – he states that ““The scandal of the evangelical mind seems to be that no mind arises from evangelicalism.””¹⁰⁸ This idea is in reference to the evangelical stray from the roots of Christianity. As Noll puts it, ““Much of what is distinctive about American evangelicalism is not essential to Christianity,””¹⁰⁹ meaning that evangelicalism has distanced itself from what Noll sees as true Christianity in favor of pursuing its political agenda in the U.S. Some of this pro-American sentiment that is not inherently religious translates to further skepticism of anything that is not purely pro-American and, in some extreme cases, nationalism. All of this highlights the general cynicism and distrust that many find to be present in evangelicalism (particularly the evangelical right). The same distrust is shown in regard to government and institutions. Since evangelicals wholeheartedly believe that God and Jesus are the highest authorities, they leave little room for government; this means that they are less willing to, for example, let the government use their tax dollars for poverty relief.

¹⁰⁵ Luo.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Gander.

¹⁰⁸ Luo.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

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

with such headlines as “The Evangelicals Who Are Taking On QAnon,”¹¹⁰ “Evangelicals Need to Address the QAnoners in Our Midst,”¹¹¹ “Beth Moore, a Prominent Evangelical, Splits With Southern Baptists,”¹¹² and “More Than 1,400 Evangelicals, Other Faith Leaders Condemn Religion at Insurrection as ‘Heretical.’”¹¹³ Evangelicals are stepping up to speak out against members of their community who do not act in ways that reflect other supposedly evangelical values. In the era of Covid, new waves of social justice movements, and a post-Trump government, many evangelical Christians are seeking reform. Some of this looks like leaving the church, some looks like confronting peers, some looks like speaking out against radical parts of their communities. Whichever form this change is taking, it is a critical turning point for evangelicalism. If evangelicals want to prove that religion has a prominent place in a new era of politics, a changing society, and a younger, more liberal generation,¹¹⁴ they need to acknowledge their issues pertaining to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other controversies and find a way to exist and thrive in such a society. This is where the evangelical left comes in. The reason I find this group so interesting and so important in this moment in time is because it is already more reflective of dominant values of the next generation of Americans. The left offers a solution for those seeking to reconcile religion and politics. It offers a rupture from the traditional evangelicalism we see in the U.S. that focuses on pelvic issues and keeping religion in the public sphere at the expense of alleviating poverty and addressing topics more pertinent to the Bible. So much of the rhetoric surrounding the intersection of religion and politics is reflective of the ideas the evangelical right has been putting forth for decades. This turns many people away from

¹¹⁰ Posner.

¹¹¹ Stetzer.

¹¹² Graham and Dias.

¹¹³ Jenkins.

¹¹⁴ Parker et al.

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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