

Micah Watson, Ph.D.  
Pew Summer Research Program Proposal  
Union University

## Evangelical Political Thought and the Bible

### I. Description

Evangelicals have been “doing politics” for a long time. From the sermons preached advocating independence from Great Britain in the 1770s,<sup>1</sup> to the abolitionists of mid-1800s and the temperance movement of the early 1900s, to the rise of the religious right in the 1970s, evangelicals have understood their faith as including a commitment to the political arena. Evangelicals are involved with politics still, and are often found in influential positions not only in politics but the academy, the arts and entertainment world, and in big business. Sociologist D. Michael Lindsay’s Pulitzer-prize nominated book, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*, highlights the extent to which evangelicals have impacted and continue to impact the cultural and political scene.<sup>2</sup>

This history coincides nicely with one of the characteristics of evangelicals: activism. Evangelicals are known as “doers” much more so than thinkers. Mark Noll’s *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* made this observation more or less a commonplace, particularly among evangelical academics. Noll’s work has played a part in this generation of evangelical scholarship perhaps not unlike the role played by Francis Schaeffer’s work for a previous generation.<sup>3</sup> One takeaway point from his book is the call for evangelicals to rethink their

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellis Sandoz, ed. *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805: Volume 1, 2nd Edition* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Though of course the style and approach of both men could hardly be more different.

tendency to act according to the admonition “don’t just sit there, do something!” and instead think along the lines of “don’t just do something, sit there! (and think for a bit.)”

It seems natural that political thought would be one promising way to respond to Noll’s *cri de couer*. After all, if evangelicals have been engaged in politics for as long as there have been evangelicals, then it follows that there should be plenty of material available for evangelical thinkers who would attempt an overarching approach to “evangelical political thought.”

In another paper<sup>4</sup> I argued in part that any political theory that is truly evangelical will include a biblical component. While I believe there is an important role for natural law to play in evangelical thinking about politics, one distinctive of evangelical thought is the conviction that we can glean moral (and thus not just theological) truths from scripture. *My research proposal for the summer of 2009 is write a chapter that constructs a framework that allows Christians to relate their understandings of scripture to the political world without relativizing scripture on the one hand nor imposing their views theocratically in a pluralistic political culture on the other.*

The goal of this proposal is not to present a comprehensive review of the myriad of ways in which Christians have approached politics. The goal is to present one framework, without claiming it to be *the* framework, within which evangelicals in particular can thoughtfully bring their scriptural convictions to bear on their political involvement in a pluralistic society. I should also note that this is one component of a larger project that I am engaged in with my political theory counterpart at Wheaton and Westmont colleges. I will articulate this framework by dividing the proposed project into three primary sections.

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<sup>4</sup> Watson, “Introductory Musings on Evangelical Political Thought,” presented at the Henry Symposium on Religion and Politics at Calvin College, April 25, 2008.

First, I will review a selected number of approaches to the use of scripture as applied to politics. Many approaches take Scripture seriously as God's authoritative word from Paul's famous admonitions in Romans 13, to the early church fathers, and to the Protestant Reformers, and many contemporary thinkers. Another line of approach treats Scripture as another "great book" that offers wisdom for those careful readers.<sup>5</sup> In this section I will argue that evangelicals are distinctive enough to require their own approach to politics.

In the second section I will highlight both the need for, and dangers of, looking to Scripture for political wisdom from within a Christian framework. While I believe evangelicals must hold Scripture as authoritative, surely it is the case that horrendous actions have been perpetrated in the past with the support of faulty readings of scripture. I will review the contemporary literature on biblical hermeneutics through the lens of political application. While most biblical hermeneutics textbooks are properly concerned with theology, I hope to apply some of their methodology and technique to the political world. I intend to take full advantage of several Christian Studies professors both this coming Spring and during the summer. I foresee these first two sections comprising one chapter-length paper.

Finally, in a second chapter-length paper, I will propose that Scripture's application to politics is comprised of informing us of proper political ends and acting as a check on the conclusions of moral reasoning apart from Scripture. That is, I do not think that Scripture speaks to governmental specifics such as bicameral legislatures and judicial review. I will, however, argue that evangelicals can carefully extract from scripture several political *ends* worth pursuing in the public square. Moreover, and more controversially within the discipline of political theory,

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<sup>5</sup> I.e., Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), and Tod Lindberg, *The Political Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

I will argue that scripture can and does act as a check on certain conclusions drawn by moral reasoning.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Scholarly Literature

There are three literatures that I will engage with for this project. The first is an ongoing literature about evangelicals and how to define them. The second consists of exemplary works by Christians and non-Christians attempting to glean political insights from Scripture. Due to the enormity of this literature, I will be selecting a few prominent works that each exemplify a particular approach. Finally, and most importantly, I will engage with literature of biblical hermeneutics. I intend to take advantage of our experts in this field by asking them for suggestions.

While there are a number of books and articles about Christianity and politics, there are few who are working on constructing a positive framework for evangelicals involved in politics. Reformed Christians, Anabaptists, and Roman Catholics all enjoy a tradition of sustained intellectual reflection on the proper Christian approach to the political things of this world. My proposed topic is part of a project that seeks to build up a tradition of uniquely evangelical thinking about politics. As such, while the subjects are familiar, the project and the proposal are original and have the potential to impact Christian thought and practice both inside and out of the evangelical tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> These are monumental topics and rather abstract in a brief proposal such as this, so perhaps a brief example would help. Several moral philosophers, some just as philosophers and several others from within the Roman Catholic tradition, claim there exists an absolute moral prohibition on lying. One wonders, however, how certain biblical texts and the potential teachings therein might affect such a statement. The account of the Egyptian women lying to Pharaoh about the baby boys as well as Rahab's deception in Jericho give reason to question an absolute moral prohibition on lying. Both the Egyptian midwives and Rahab are singled out as pleasing God through their actions. Part of what I'll be doing in this proposal is gauging the extent to which lessons drawn from episodes such as these impact moral and political principles.

Selected Works

- Bruce, Steve. 1998. *Conservative Protestant Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Budziszewski, J., and David L. Weeks. 2006. *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic.
- Carter, Stephen L. 2000. *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Basic Books.
- Hart, D. G. 2004. *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestants in the Age of Billy Graham*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Augustine. 2003. *City of God*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Bartholomew, Craig, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Al Wolters (editors). 2002. *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Bebbington, David. 1989. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. Unwin Hyman: London, Boston.
- Black, Amy E. 2008. *Beyond Left and Right: Helping Christians Make Sense of American Politics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Budziszewski, J. 2006. *Evangelicals in the Public Square*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.
- Hunter, James Davidson. 1987. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Koyzis, David T. 2003. *Political visions and Illusions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Marsden, George M. 1991. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Mill, John Stuart. 2007. *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Nation, Mark Thiessen. 2003. "John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, Evangelical, Catholic." <http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/july03nation.html#Ref1>

- Noll, Mark. 1994. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- O'Donovan, Oliver. 1996. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Donovan, Oliver, and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan. 2004. *The Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics Past and Present*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Smidt, Corwin. "The Principled Pluralist Response [to the Catholic Approach]." *Church, State and Public Justice: Five Views*. Edited by Paul Kemeny. 2007. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Strauss, Leo. 1979. "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy." *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*. III:111-118.
- Strauss, Leo. 1957. "What is Political Philosophy?" *Journal of Politics*. 19:3, 343-368.
- Tinder, Glenn. 2004. *Political Thinking: The Perennial Questions* 6th Ed. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Wald, Kenneth. 2007. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. 5th Ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Weeks, David. 2006. "Carl F.H. Henry on Civic Live." in *Evangelicals in the Public Square*. by J. Budziszewski. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion*. Princeton University Press.

### III. Time Frame

I envision being involved in this overall project (evangelical political thought) for years to come. My colleagues and I have presented at one conference and are seeking to present additional papers at an upcoming conference in March. My time frame for this specific proposal begins in the Spring when I will seek audiences with my colleagues in Christian Studies and begin working through a suggested reading list. As I am already familiar with the literatures surrounding evangelical identity and religion and politics, beginning my hermeneutical study in the Spring will allow me to spend the summer months constructing my argument and putting it to

paper. By the end of the summer I will have two chapter-length papers as described in my proposal narrative.

IV. Budget

The funds from the Pew Grant would allow me to dedicate time this summer toward research and writing. I will not have to look for other means of employment nor travel elsewhere to find it. In addition, I would use some of the funds to purchase seminal hermeneutical textbooks and specialized works of political theory.

Support for designated research and writing time: \$4,000

Books: \$500

V. Integration of Research and Christian Faith

I subscribe wholeheartedly to the notion that the truth of Christianity informs all walks of life and all scholarly disciplines. The relationship between my faith and my scholarly work can be illustrated with the help of an anecdote from my first year of graduate study. I was taking a class on politics and greatness taught by a rather vociferous atheist who enjoyed debating students in class. The topic of that day was human dignity and what grounded, if anything, the worth of men and women as persons. Several students, including myself, were pressing the professor as to his underlying reason for why men and women have special dignity and rights that cannot be violated. After some back-and-forth my professor looked at me and thundered, "All right, Watson, what do you think gives man dignity?"

I had known that at some point the relationship between my faith and my scholarly work in graduate school would "go public". But, perhaps foolishly, I had hoped to somehow establish myself with my colleagues on some safe neutral ground before broaching the topic of my commitment to an explicitly Christian foundation. Other Christians I knew had counseled this course of action, though I soon came to realize that my particular subfield, political theory, made such a strategy impossible for me. This is because political theory asks the fundamental questions and moves forward with the answers. What is man? What is the good life? How should we treat others? My professor's question brought all of this to a head and after hesitating for a moment I answered, "I believe men and women have dignity because they are created in the image of God."

This anecdote illustrates in part how my faith informs my scholarship. I am interested in pursuing good-natured argument, dialogue, and questions with my colleagues and students, Christian or not, because I believe that there are true answers to be found. This does not mean that every argument is couched in biblical terms, or that there is nothing of value to be gleaned from different, even hostile, perspectives. Nevertheless, ideas have consequences. Politics based on a Nietzschean view of humanity will look quite different than a politics inspired by St. Augustine.

The particular questions that I am most interested in are ones that have been asked since the beginning of Christianity. As the Catholic scholar Ernest Fortin observed, "The God of the New Testament is not a very political animal." Or to put it in a different way, C.S. Lewis wrote that Christianity offers us a great deal of wisdom as to political *ends*, but not necessarily with *means*. We know we should feed the poor, but the Bible does not offer cooking lessons.

Thus, as Christians, we know as a matter of doctrine that human beings have a special kind of dignity that results from their being made in God's image. Yet God seems to have left it to us to work out how best to instantiate that understanding in our laws and customs. While we have some direct political guidance from the New Testament (paying taxes, legitimacy of government), much of the hard work of politics is left to us, by God's grace, to work out ourselves. So I understand my task as a Christian political theorist to be one of defending some of the truths, and implications, of our Christian faith, while at the same time thinking hard about what sort of society might best reflect these truths given religious pluralism.

This particular proposal is one component in a larger attempt to understand how evangelicals as a distinct subset of Christianity can approach politics such that they are both faithful to their core convictions *and* mindful and prudent with regard to others who do not share those convictions.

VI. Curriculum Vitae

Please see attached.