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COULD
CIVIL
WAR



OVERCOMING POLARIZATION,
DISCOVERING UNITY, AND

HEALING

THE

NATION



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THE EVANGELICAL DILEMMA AND THE SEARCH FOR PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY



EVANGELICALS ARE DIVIDED OVER POLITICS. They are experiencing their own cold civil war in the pews, afraid to talk to one another, angry, wounded.¹ A year ago, I had lunch with a fellow church member, an extremely successful veteran Hollywood producer. He self-describes as a left-of-center, pro-life, registered independent, politically engaged, non-Trump voter. As he sat down he seemed preoccupied, so I asked him how he was doing. Not well, he said. He told me that he just had a long conversation with an old friend, a long argument, really, where his friend condemned him for *not* supporting the president, practically calling him a traitor to America. He couldn't believe it. He felt attacked, misunderstood, and hurt.

After sympathizing with his hurt over this political rift with his friend, I told him that my Facebook feed is filled with the same kind of derision in the other direction. Not a day goes by that my Trump-hating Christian friends, many of them pastors and Christian leaders, some I've known for years, attack Trump supporters, calling them hypocrites, accusing them of lying, being conspiracy theorists, and being brainwashed in a cult.

No wonder people in the pews avoid discussing politics and avoid one another. And even if we are willing to take the attacks from friends, defending

ourselves is futile—social media makes rational dialogue impossible. As soon as someone tries to point out the other candidate did the same thing, they are accused of dodging the issue, of being guilty of the dreaded *whataboutism*, the new term for excusing the behavior of one's favorite candidate by pointing out the behavior of the opposing candidate.

But the real goal of slinging around *whataboutism* is to avoid the charge of hypocrisy. No one wants to be seen as inconsistent, but even more important no one wants to jeopardize their side's hold on power or give the other side ammunition, so they remain silent about the infractions of their side. After years of condemning Bill Clinton for his character, conservative evangelicals were suddenly willing to give Donald Trump a pass on his three marriages. For the past four years we heard nonstop about how Trump was a danger to the institutions of democracy, and now progressive evangelicals say nothing about Biden, who in his first one hundred days has signed more executive orders, bypassing Congress, than any president in history.

At some level, when it comes to electoral politics and our favorite candidate, we are all tribalists. And this tribalism prevents us from having calm, rational discussions with those across the political aisle. The partisan divisions have grown worse over the years, fraying friendships and even marriages.² Moreover, it seems that every month there is a new issue to divide evangelicals. Conflicts over Trump's character, the Russia conspiracy, the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, immigrant children at the border, the first impeachment, the pandemic lockdowns, church shutdowns, and mask wearing—these divided evangelicals over the course of the Trump presidency. Now disputes over election fraud conspiracies, vaccine mandates and vaccine passports, and mass immigration at the US–Mexican border continue to divide evangelicals. Christians online and in the media take sides. People dig in, their views already confirmed by bias, and more division results. Divided, Christians stop talking to one another, and the unity of the church is splintered. And who wins when this happens? Certainly not the church, nor our witness, nor our ability to impact the world around us.

And in the midst of all this division, many pastors have no idea what to do. Some decide, having been deeply affected by the Black Lives Matter protests after the George Floyd death, that it's time to educate their congregation about racism and white supremacy, pleasing some in the

congregation, angering others. Other pastors decide it is time to teach on Christian patriotism and love of country, again pleasing some and pushing away others. Churches now are taking part in their own version of the “big sort,” not sorting over doctrine or worship styles but political affiliation, blue versus red, Trump versus never-Trump.³ And still other pastors, desperately wanting to hold on to unity, avoid politics at all costs and stick to preaching the gospel text—keeping the application limited to the individual, afraid that any reference to our current political situation will alienate a large portion of the congregation. Doing this, however, avoids one problem only to engender another. By ignoring the challenges and suffering, the anxiety and the fear, the economic hardships and political disagreements, these pastors neglect to shepherd their members. They miss out on an opportune time to teach a biblical worldview—a worldview that would give tools to understand our current polarization, how to be salt and light in the midst of it, and how to bring renewal. And, even worse, their silence affirms the status quo.

A few months before the 2020 election, I drove to San Diego to spend four hours on a Saturday morning with one of my former associate pastors, Steven Cooper, and a handful of his leaders from the center-city church he was pastoring at the time. As a pastor he understood his responsibility to address the struggles of his members and teach them to think Christianly about every area of life, including their civic and political responsibilities. Yet, not wanting to alienate anyone in his congregation over politics, he didn’t know what to do. He was honest about the struggle. The current political climate had become so contentious, so complicated, and so confusing on both sides of the political spectrum that it was hard to even know where to begin. And he felt like no matter how much he followed national politics, how much he read, or how hard he tried to understand the polarized views in his congregation, he just did not know enough to bring the two sides together. So it was safer not to say anything about politics, hoping things would get better and heal over time. But he knew it probably wouldn’t. So I ventured down to San Diego to see if I could help.

Even before I got there, I knew how hard it would be. There are a myriad of forces that encourage polarization, many that monetarily benefit from it and even more who see polarization as part of a plan to change society. Big media has discovered that polarization and fearmongering pays big bucks.⁴

Social media outlets like Twitter seem to thrive on nastiness. Politicians stoke the us-versus-them divide to build party loyalty and destroy opponents. Big business has become woke. Education is now politicized. Polarization is everywhere—in professional sports, fashion, architecture, pop culture, Hollywood, and even the military. There doesn't seem to be any safe space anymore, any free-speech zone, any place in our society where we can get away from the culture war. All of life is political. And in early 2021, it only got worse. Now, if we step out of line on social media, we can be deplatformed, demonetized, destroyed. Now, if a pastor or a church holds a position that just a year ago would be considered mainstream, or if we challenge the ruling class in anyway, we are in trouble and could earn the appellation of “domestic terrorist.”

How dangerous is it getting for pastors and churches? Recently, the *New York Times* proposed the Biden administration adopt a “Reality Czar” to help our nation determine what reality is and what is not, what thoughts and actions are acceptable, and what ones are out of bounds, dangerous to the norms and institutions of our democracy.⁵ Facebook has appointed a vice president of civil rights to keep all content and users in line with the founder's vision of the world.⁶ Google polices speech through their secret algorithm.⁷ The result: some Hollywood and music stars are being canceled in social media and fired from their jobs. We now have a confluence of big government, big media, and big tech joining the post-9/11 surveillance state to root out views not acceptable to the ruling class. In fact, someone criticized a politician on Twitter to later have the police show up at his door.⁸ In early February 2021, the new US defense secretary ordered a stand-down to begin rooting out anyone who holds views similar to those of the people who stormed the Capitol whether they were there or not.⁹ The FBI and CIA are already rooting out domestic terrorists in our country. How soon before church websites, sermons, and mission statements are next, particularly for those who believe in constitutional republicanism?

But as I arrived at Steven's backyard patio for discussion, on a cool September day, a nice ocean breeze blowing, I resolved one thing: in spite of all the dangers of the cancel culture or that even this conversation could increase polarization, Christian leaders must have these conversations, learning to understand the context of their ministry and what must be done

to train their members. Fear of persecution, the dread of cancel culture, or the reluctance of offending the ruling class or further dividing members can't be an excuse for avoiding politics. They must take the risk. But if pastors are going to take the risk, it begins by equipping themselves. If they are going to have productive conversations, understand the who-what-why of polarization, and lead their churches and organizations to have real impact in their towns and cities, then they must be trained. They can't give away what they don't have. But this is the problem. They aren't trained—most are theologians, not political philosophers.

When George Floyd died in spring 2020, and protests and riots erupted, I kept waiting for the church to speak into the situation, to say something, to lead, to save our cities. I wanted to see churches give the people in the pews some guidance on what was happening. But I only saw more partisan divide. As the media politicized it, so did Christian leaders. I was shocked how ill-equipped the evangelical church was, unable to provide any national leadership, reacting more than leading.

And as the summer progressed, with riots spreading to dozens of cities, the country teetering on breakdown, the coronavirus creating more economic hardship, battles increasing over how to end the pandemic, and disputes about science and medicine growing, it was obvious to anyone paying attention that the church was unprepared to provide national leadership on any of these issues. Instead what it provided was tribal, politicized, and polarized. It seemed like every conversation came back to Trump, either blaming or excusing him. And then when the Capitol riots happened, it exposed the church again, for its lack of training, its inability to understand what was going on and speak with one voice; instead the event became one more polarizing issue, political theater for advancing partisan agendas. Why is the evangelical church so ill-equipped to provide leadership in times of national crisis? Why are so many pastors unable to help their congregations think through so many tough civil and cultural issues?

Over the past few years I have surveyed what books have shaped pastors' politics and which of those, if any, they recommend to curious congregation members who want to understand politics. Sometimes they can think of one or two, but typically they draw a blank. Part of the problem is the dearth of books written by evangelicals on politics. So few evangelicals are trained to

write them; without the resources, pastors aren't trained, and when pastors aren't trained, they can't disciple their members on civic issues—how to think about them, what to do about them, being salt and light within them. Here is a partial list of recent issues that Christians are facing on a daily basis:

- not wearing masks versus wearing them
- obeying emergency measures versus civil disobedience
- colorblindness versus antiracism
- nationalism versus globalism
- climate change skepticism versus climate change acceptance
- biological binary sex versus gender fluidity
- free speech versus cancel culture
- equality versus equity
- capitalism versus socialism
- border walls versus open borders
- woke schools versus patriotic schools

I could add more items to this list: these are everyday issues that Christians encounter on social media, cable news, and podcasts, and in discussions with their neighbors, on their jobs, and while educating their children. In fact, in my Pasadena neighborhood, every other house seems to have a sign in their yard supporting BLM and open immigration, broadcasting to everyone what side of the culture war they are on. On our Nextdoor app, people rage against those not wearing masks while walking their dogs alone. And yet in the midst of all this social conflict, most churches remain silent on these issues, giving little help to their members to think and act Christianly. Why? Some of it is because of fear, terrified of dividing their church. Some of it is fear of being canceled by the culture or fined.¹⁰ But I think it is deeper than a lack of courage. At its heart, the problem is that evangelical leaders lack a public philosophy, a well-thought-out philosophy of civic thought and action, a worldview that includes the issues of citizenship and civics and civility; without this, most (but not all) pastors don't have the confidence to lean into these issues.

THE GREAT EVANGELICAL WEAKNESS

In his helpful book *Evangelicals in the Public Square*, J. Budziszewski puts his finger on the problem: “Although evangelicals,” he says, “have long played a part in the public square, *they have never developed a clear, cohesive, and Christian view of what politics is about.*”¹¹ Some of this is because evangelicals have historically put the stress on individual conversion and not paid as much attention to the broader culture: “If only everyone were converted, the public square would take care of itself.”¹² But more importantly, he contends, among evangelicals “orderly political reflection has not yet risen to the task.”¹³ What keeps evangelicals from having lasting influence in politics and culture, “from offering a serious challenge to the dominant political theories of the secular establishment,” argues Budziszewski, “is that it has failed to ask many of the most essential questions, failed to answer many of the questions it *has* asked, and thrown away half of its resources for answering them.”¹⁴ Evangelicals lack a thought-out and detailed political philosophy. To begin, writes Budziszewski,

adequate political theory . . . would include three elements: (1) an *orienting doctrine*, or a guide to thought, explaining the place of government in the world as a whole; (2) a *practical doctrine*, or a guide to action, explaining in broad but practical terms how Christians should conduct themselves in the civic realm; and (3) a *cultural apologetic*, or a guide to persuasion, explaining how to go about making the specific proposals of those who share the other two element plausible to those who do not.¹⁵

Included in this apologetic, he continues, is the understanding that the evangelicals’ commitment to truth will clash with secularism, and ultimately there will be a conflict of visions. Budziszewski is calling evangelicals to do the hard work of formulating a public philosophy. He contends that a coherent political theory or public philosophy must include a theoretical component—the roles of government and civil society and the ends to which the society is committed; a practical component—a theory of governance, that is, how people should conduct themselves in the public square; and a grounding or a cultural apologetic—the underlying justification for our life together, that is, what provides the ultimate authority for our life together and why this agreement is necessary to provide unity and consensus.

So often, however, when I bring up the need for pastors to develop a public philosophy, they push back, arguing that they don't need one, the Bible is their textbook. "We don't need political philosophy. We just need to faithfully preach the text," they say. "And if someone has the wrong political views, it is because they are not faithful to the Bible." And there are a number of books out there that reinforce this view.¹⁶

But here's the problem. Both partisan sides have the Bible, and both sides appeal to it, sometimes using the exact same verses, on government (e.g., Romans 13), on immigration, or on what makes a godly leader, to defend their side. Yet how is it possible, then, that the same Bible can be used to defend such divergent, polar opposite political views? How is it possible that Christians like David French and Eric Metaxas come to such divergent political views on former president Trump? How can theologian Wayne Grudem and journalist Michael Gerson, or conservative activist Franklin Graham and progressive theologian Ron Sider, see the political world so differently? Or how is it that author Jemar Tisby believes that critical race theory can help us understand biblical justice and yet pastor Voddie Baucham contends it is a Trojan horse inside the evangelical church?¹⁷ How can historian John Fea argue that America was never a Christian nation, but historian David Mark Hall believe it was?¹⁸ If the Bible is all we need for politics, why does it mean so many different things to so many different people?¹⁹

TWIN PROBLEMS OF ACCOMMODATION AND INFLATION

According to Budziszewski, the reason is simple: most evangelicals fall into the error of "projective accommodation." That is, evangelicals accommodate Scripture to their own political views "by reading those views into the biblical text."²⁰ Over the centuries, he contends, evangelicals have found warrant for monarchies, republics, democracies, and many other forms of government. But here's the truth, at once shocking and liberating. When it comes to the proper form of government, "Scripture provides no criterion." This is the evangelical dilemma:

The problem for evangelical thinkers is not that the Bible contains no political teaching (for it does) but that the Bible does not provide *enough by itself* for an adequate political theory. Although important general

principles about government can indeed be drawn from Scripture, the list of such principles is short.²¹

After listing ten general biblical principles, he notes that while “these ten principles are sufficient to give a jolt to secularist political thinking . . . they fall far short of an adequate doctrine of politics, . . . in fact, not a single requirement of political theory is satisfied.”²² Here’s the rub for Budziszewski: the Bible does not give us an adequate orienting doctrine, an adequate practical doctrine, or an adequate cultural apologetic.

The ten principles tell us precious little about the place of government in the world as a whole, still less about how Christians conduct themselves in the civic realm, and almost nothing about how to make Christian cultural aims and aspirations plausible to those who do not share the biblical worldview.²³

And because the Bible does not include everything needed for a robust political theory and evangelicals are unwilling to admit this (for fear that they may somehow undermine the sufficiency of Scripture), evangelicals are confident that they can fill in what is missing. But what happens, contends Budziszewski, is that “they try to draw more money than the bank contains” and thus are guilty of “inflationary” tactics: taking aspects of the Bible like “God’s code for ancient Israel,” or the biblical theme of covenant, or particular “policies adopted by biblical rulers” and inflating them into a full-blown political theory.²⁴

What all such methods have in common is that they make the normative political teaching of the Bible seem more ample than it is. They read into it principles that are not really there that really come from the intuitions of the interpreter . . . in the political thought of evangelicals, much of what passes for biblicism is really intuitionism in disguise.²⁵

Thus, evangelicals hold certain political or social views or belong to a particular political persuasion and then *find* in Scripture what *we want* in order to baptize it with the Bible. Examples of inflationary tactics from both sides, in history and present times, can easily be found.²⁶ When evangelicals connect the Bible to current cultural views, they think that this demonstrates a high view of Scripture, when in fact it often shows that culture is the more powerful factor, enticing evangelicals into accommodation and inflation.

THE EVANGELICAL DILEMMA

Why is it so easy to fall into these twin errors of accommodation and inflation? According to Budziszewski, “Although evangelicals are rightly committed to grounding their political reflection in revelation, the Bible provides insufficient material for the task.”²⁷ It’s that simple. Yet evangelicals do not want to admit this fact, and thus the twin errors of inflation and accommodation remain at the heart of the “evangelical dilemma.” According to Budziszewski, the answer to the dilemma, if they are willing to admit it, “lies in the recognition that the Bible is only part of the revelation.” Along with *special revelation* in the Bible that God has provided to the people of faith, he has also provided *general revelation*, which is found in nature and our use of reason, making his revelation evident “not only to believers but to all humankind.”²⁸ Budziszewski mentions Psalm 19:1 as a good example: “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (NRSV). We see this same knowledge of general revelation in Romans 1:19-20 where Paul writes, “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world.”

Because this knowledge of God and his creation is known, Paul goes on to say that when people outside of the family of faith “who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires. . . . They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts” (Romans 2:14-15).²⁹ Budziszewski calls this knowledge “natural law,” which he defines “as an ordinance of reason, for the common good, made by him who has care of the community.”³⁰ In Reformed circles this has always meant that God has embedded his creational norms into the world, that these norms, the way things ought to be, can be discerned and carried out, though often imperfectly and with great difficulty.³¹ General revelation or natural law, then, is the conviction that design permeates the natural realm in general, and human beings in particular; that our conscience bears witness to its existence; and that when we violate natural law we not only know it intellectually, often suppressing it, but we experience it with deep feelings of guilt and brokenness.³² Through cultivating a heart of wisdom, humans can read God’s general revelation and know God’s design for the world. Yet many evangelicals are unfamiliar with

the concept of general revelation, thus they struggle to work out a full-orbed public philosophy.

In holding up natural law, Budziszewski is not saying that the Bible is defective. He takes pains to say that “the Bible is indispensable.”³³ Without the Bible we don’t know where to go for forgiveness when we break the law and our conscience condemns us. Special revelation tells us not only where to go for absolution but who absolves us, laying out the plan of salvation. But just as natural law needs the Bible, the Bible depends on natural law, taking for granted that its readers bring a certain natural knowledge with them when they encounter the Bible. The Bible can’t contain all truth about all subject matters, so the Bible takes “for granted that we know certain large truths,” Natural law exists; and we can’t but know it.³⁴ Thus both forms of knowledge, general revelation and special revelation, work together. For Budziszewski, God communicates through *both* general and special revelation. We can’t have a full view of knowledge, ourselves, and our responsibilities without both, each complementing and enhancing the other.³⁵

And here we get to the crux of Budziszewski’s argument—why evangelicals fall into the twin errors of accommodation and inflation and why they lack a full-orbed political theory. Without a natural-law doctrine, without these first principles, rooted in both special revelation *and* general revelation, evangelicals will never be able to work out a coherent public philosophy. And without it they will continue to force the Bible to say more than it is capable of, inflating biblical passages that confirm a political bias. But even more importantly, without a public philosophy, which takes hard work and deep thinking, Christians will not have the resources to transcend polarization, staying stuck in tribalism almost by default. And when this happens, Christians add to the cold civil war we are experiencing, increasing the echo chamber. If we evangelicals are going to avoid this polarization, we must rediscover a robust vision of general revelation, that is, natural law, and do the hard work of formulating a public philosophy, one that is faithful to both divine and natural revelation.

MY SEARCH FOR PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

I didn’t know it at the time, but my search for a public philosophy started as an undergrad at Gordon College, a small, Christian liberal arts school in

New England where I majored in politics. As a fairly new believer fascinated with politics, I wanted to develop a well thought-out worldview, one that would help me understand politics. I admired political thinkers, who, regardless of the political issue, could fit most issues into a consistent political philosophy. I wanted that skill. In my classes, my professors introduced the thought of Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), who taught extensively on common grace.³⁶ In Kuyper I found someone who had worked out a public philosophy based on both general and special revelation.

Following college I enrolled at Fuller Theological Seminary to suss out the connection between these creational norms and public philosophy. At Fuller I learned more about common grace and natural law tradition under the tutelage of Richard Mouw, who a few years later would become Fuller’s president and remain in that post for twenty years. He introduced me to the twentieth-century neo-Kuyperian tradition, comprising those who took their cues from Kuyper and tried to apply his principles to the issues of the day.³⁷

After Fuller, I attended the PhD program at Georgetown University, set among grand nineteenth-century buildings, manicured lawns, tree-canopied walkways, and founded in the Catholic tradition.³⁸ With a strong tradition of natural law, which overlapped a great deal with my Kuyperian views on common grace, I decided to major in political theory. My mentor was Professor George Carey, a nationally renowned expert on *The Federalist Papers*. Under his tutelage and that of Father James Schall, a Jesuit priest, I was able to dig deeper into natural law. Both professors impressed on me what the rejection of this tradition meant for our nation.

One essay by Carey had a huge impact on me. In his “On the Degeneration of Public Philosophy in America,” Carey argues that public philosophy, rooted in natural law “provides transcendent standards for society: standards to set goals, serve as restraints, and as measures of society’s health.”³⁹ Therefore, “the loss of the public philosophy . . . has created a disorder within the ‘soul’ of modern society that weakens its cohesion and moral sensibilities.”⁴⁰ I began to realize that this “disorder within the soul,” brought on by the rejection of natural law was at the heart of our nation’s disintegration and polarization.

A short time later, I came across another helpful essay, “What Is the Public Philosophy?” by University of Virginia’s James Ceaser, a nationally recognized scholar of the presidency.⁴¹ Ceaser contends that for a public philosophy to be effective, it must address the following questions:

What is the bond or social glue that constitutes Americans as a people; what are the ends—and their rank order . . . equality, freedom, order, justice and virtue? What are the respective roles assigned to government and civil society, or the public and the private spheres, in promoting these ends; how is political authority conceived and allocated, which is sometimes referred to as a “theory of governance”?⁴²

Another way to express this is that “the public philosophy may therefore be conceived as a system in which the parts bear certain connections to each other.”⁴³

For Ceaser these represent the “political elements” of a public philosophy. And different public philosophies will differ on the question of ends, roles, and theory of governance. Yet for Ceaser, it would be easy for us to stop at “this list of recognizable practical political elements.”⁴⁴ But understanding public philosophy raises deeper questions. For example, what justifies any decision on political arrangements about power sharing, liberty, and law? Here we get to the question of justification or what he calls “grounding,” that is, what is the ultimate authority to answer questions of means and ends. How public philosophies are grounded “are integral parts of the public philosophy.”⁴⁵ To further define the term he continues,

a grounding refers to a philosophical or theological foundation that derives from a first principle about the character of the world as a whole or of social existence. . . . A grounding is deemed to be so fundamental that it supplies a starting point in need of no further justification; it answers the “why” question that anyone might pose.⁴⁶

Grounding, thus, was key.

Because of this overlap of “grounding” with natural law and general revelation, I wanted to attend Georgetown and no other university. If I just wanted to understand the parts of a government and how politics worked, apart from a grounding, I could have gone to any graduate program that offered programs in political science. There I could have learned about the

parts and studied politics from a scientific point of view. But I wanted to understand more than just the parts. I wanted to understand how these parts were grounded, and how they fit together, almost by design. And for that I had to find one of the few graduate programs that still valued normative questions and hadn't eliminated their political philosophy programs, reducing politics to the mechanics of a science, devoid of first principles, relying on opinion surveys and sociology. I knew that questions of grounding are ultimately religious.⁴⁷ Because whether one believes in God or not (or something else, whether it be nature, natural rights, history, culture, expressive individualism), the grounding of any system is ultimately a religious one. Faith is put in something to justify the political system. The crisis of this grounding—fundamental disputes about first principles—is at the heart of our public philosophy. Because if we no longer have the correct grounding, we no longer have a vital center; instead we are in the midst of a culture war.

Public philosophy, then, is about how humans get along, how they form and maintain a common life together, how they handle conflict and disagreements, and ultimately what law and conception of justice they appeal to in order to not only ground life together but settle ongoing conflict.⁴⁸ As James Hunter points out, our cultural war today is ultimately a crisis of authority, a crisis over what Ceaser calls grounding. What is the authority (grounding) that ultimately governs our life together? What was the grounding of our founding, and what grounds our democratic project today? Ultimately, this question, even more than the particular parts of our life together (constitutional government, separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, associational life) is at the heart of our debates over public philosophy and our political polarization.

MY BIG BREAKTHROUGH

Returning to our discussion of the evangelical dilemma, how does my discovery so many years ago—the need for a well-thought-out public philosophy, one grounded in natural law—help the church and its leaders, both pastors and marketplace leaders? How does it help us move beyond the evangelical dilemma we experience? To start, it means we must realize that we need both general revelation, natural law, *and* divine revelation, the Bible. And this means that if we are going to understand what has been revealed

to humans in the area of general revelation, we have to study the history of political thought.

That is why I went to Georgetown and why I have spent a lifetime reading political philosophy. I glean insights from general revelation, integrate these insights with what the Bible says, and formulate a public philosophy, one that grounds our political system and gives us a framework for living as citizens, all the while trying to avoid the twin errors of inflation and accommodation. But it hasn't been easy. From the start I knew that if I were to work out a public philosophy to guide me and help the evangelical church, I needed a framework for making sense of the history of political thought. So I set about devising one.

MAPPING THE RIGHT-LEFT SPECTRUM

One of the more interesting classes I took at Georgetown was A Symposium on Conservatism, taught by George Carey, a class that attempted to help us map the different conservative views on public philosophy. I learned that modern conservatism was basically a reaction to the way modern liberals had, according to conservatives, hijacked the classical liberal position. It was a history of their attempt to get it back. That conservatives were the original classical liberals and that modern liberals are actually progressives, desiring to break with the liberalism of the founders, was at the heart of conservatism. Yet even within conservatism, I quickly discovered, thinkers differed widely about their understanding of classical liberalism; for example, what had gone wrong in American, when it went wrong, who was to blame, and how to fix it.

During the class I recall my attempt to map what I was learning, placing each of the conservative thinkers on the liberal-conservative spectrum. But I struggled to do so. If, as Carey taught, the original founding and the Constitution balanced order and liberty, calling it "ordered liberty," was it possible to put the Left on the side of liberty and the Right on the side of order? I tried this, but it posed problems.

For example, where would I place libertarians, committed to individual and economic freedom? Would I place them on the liberty side (the left) or the order side (the right)? And what about liberals who champion extreme expressive individualism, and yet at the same time want more government

control of the economy, some going so far as calling for socialism? Would I place them on the left (liberty) or on the right (order) side of the spectrum? And where would I put social and cultural conservatives, who stress the need for morality and virtue? Would I place them on the order (right) side?

And where would I place myself, as a neo-Kuyperian? After all, I was highly critical of both the expressive individualism of the left (liberty side) and at the same time in favor of the need for morality and virtue in society (order side). Yet I was also against the administrative state ordering the economy and in favor of economic freedom. Was I on the order side, the liberty side, or both? Was I a classical liberal or a cultural conservative or both? At the time, I began to realize that the left-right spectrum was inadequate, but I didn't have an alternative. So when I left Georgetown my attempt at discovering a framework was sadly incomplete. But I kept working on it for decades.

During the two-plus decades that followed my graduate work at Georgetown, I continued to rely on my understanding of the left-right spectrum, doing my best to overcome its limitations in my own public philosophy. For the most part, modern political liberals continued their drumbeat for more and more personal autonomy, breaking away from all traditional authority structures like the family and church, especially in the area of sexuality and morality, described so well in Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. From Hollywood movies to Madison Avenue to postmodern relativism in the universities to expressive individualism being enshrined in our judicial law, liberalism trumpeted personal gratification and desire. Liberals constantly decried the conservative attempt to legislate morality, infringing on the individuals' right to determine their own morality, truth, and good life.

In the 1990s the liberal commitment to personal autonomy and liberation was at the heart of the Left's hatred of the Christian Right. Since there was no standard for the good, individuals must be free from all traditional authority, particularly traditional religion to pursue their own ideas of the good life. "If it feels good, do it" was the liberal mantra. This continued through the 2000s during the George W. Bush years. Then, around 2008, I noticed something curious: the Left's message began to change. Suddenly, the Left seemed to discover a vision of the good, not just for the individual

but for society as a whole. It turns out there is a morality after all, there is a way all people *should* live, there is a cosmic vision of justice and the good. But there was a twist.

This new progressive vision didn't include the founding documents of America. In fact, instead of seeing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as allies for personal autonomy and expressive individualism, as the Left had done for decades, the Far Left decreed these documents and the entire founding of American as evil, compromised from the start. Now the founding fathers were seen as racist, the Constitution as endorsing slavery, and the entire system corrupt.⁴⁹ All of a sudden, I noticed the Left wasn't appealing to our founding in order to call Americans back to its guiding principles (as Martin Luther King Jr. did in his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), that is, to live up to its ideals, but that these very ideals were evil. If America was ever to be a place we could be proud of, it had to decry its past, erase its history, tear down its monuments, root out all racism, homophobia, misogyny, destroy capitalism, and begin anew, creating a new socialist utopia. The Left went from being against those who wanted to legislate morality to legislating their own type of morality.

Then, around 2009, the Left's vision of justice began to influence the church.⁵⁰ As the Christian Right was waning, the Christian Left was waxing. Books about justice started to appear, many of them wanting to revive Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel teaching, a helpful charge to serve the poor but a deeply flawed theological account of the Christian's life and the state's responsibility.

Then I noticed another change. Around 2015, books from the Christian Left were not just calling for the government to spend more money on the poor, to increase the size of the welfare state, but were calling the entire American system, root and branch, into question. They too were condemning the Constitution, claiming that any document that protected slavery must be rejected.

But as the Left was moving further left, the Right seemed to become more radical as well, demonstrating a loss of faith not only in our current system but calling into question the founding.⁵¹ This was new. In condemning the illiberal takeover of the Constitution, Christian thinkers on the right were calling for illiberal solutions, sometimes radically libertarian solutions. To

burn it all down. So even as evangelicals on the left were moving further left, Christians on the right were moving further right.

MY BREAKTHROUGH

In 2018, halfway through the Trump presidency, in the midst of so much polarization in our nation and the church, I began sketching out this book, wanting to explain polarization and why the evangelical church needed a public philosophy. But I ran into a problem. If I were to explain polarization, I needed a better framework than the left-right spectrum. But nothing better existed. I was still using the outdated left-right spectrum.

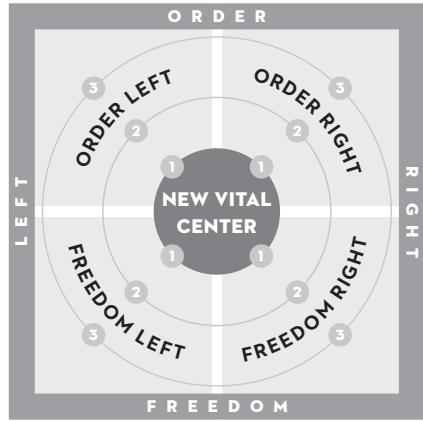
That is when I had a breakthrough. What if the left (freedom) and the right (order) don't sit on opposite sides of the freedom-order continuum; what if each have an order and a freedom side? If this were true, it would explain why it was so hard to map them on an axis. So at that moment, I took out my crude drawing of the left-right spectrum and drew a line right down the middle, bisecting the left and right, thus creating a quadrant with two axes, not one. On one side of the new axis was order and the other side freedom, showing that the left and the right both have two sides—order and freedom. Thus the left and the right both had an order side and a freedom side. Immediately, my mapping started making sense. I no longer struggled with deciding where to put thinkers and authors; plotting them on the quadrant became fairly simple.

But then I discovered something else. Within each quadrant some representatives were more radical than others in the quadrant. So I took out my pencil again and drew a line, dissecting each quadrant, radiating out from the center axis. On this line I drew three positions. I could have had more, but these categories seemed enough to show the progression from the middle out to the extremes.

Looking at the extremes in each quadrant (the #3 position), I realized that these four extremes are pulling further and further away from the center. They are the ones speaking with the loudest voice, abetted by our national media. Furthermore, I noticed that all four extremes have a strong proclivity to illiberal solutions, favoring a type of elitist oligarchy over democracy, the rule of the elite over the many, and opening them up to the charge of fascism or totalitarianism.

But I didn't just notice the existence of the four extremes on the left and the right. As I began to place certain thinkers in the first positions (closest to the center), I began to see something curious. Thinkers in these spots, unlike the four extremes, didn't reject the natural-law tradition; they recognized the need for some kind of grounding and were much more open to returning to the founding documents, rooted as they were in an antecedent authority, one that transcended oligarchy (rule of the elite) and democracy (rule by the voice of the people). In different ways, from different angles to be sure, the four positions were defending a kind of constitutional republicanism, a tradition, certainly, that needed to be reformed or recovered but one worth fighting for nonetheless.

So just like that, I had a system to help understand the groups, thinkers, and ideas that are causing our polarization, and for organizing those quickly. I now had a tool to understand how we lost the vital center and what it looks like to regain it. And, finally, I had discovered a framework to develop a public philosophy capable of unifying Americans, including evangelicals, giving the church a road map for mission, a guide to impact, and the vision to overcome cynicism.



THE NEW VITAL CENTER QUADRANT

After spending four hours with Pastor Steven and his leaders in San Diego, laying out the quadrant framework, explaining how we lost the vital center leading to so much polarization, and how we could regain a new vital center rooted in natural law, they seemed to experience a breakthrough. Finally, here was a tool, a framework that could revolutionize how they disciplined their members and trained them to impact the city.

In fact, on my way home, Steven called me on my cell phone, explaining that his leaders were so empowered by the quadrant framework that they wanted to share it with the rest of the congregation and begin formulating how their church, using the new insights, could live out the new vital center,

influencing the city and the citizens who lived there. The quadrant framework gave them a plan, empowered them, inspired them.

I will explain in more detail this framework, my quadrant system. But first, we need to understand how we lost the vital center in our country and how this started us on the road to polarization. It is to that story that we now turn.

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