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## TOO POLITICAL

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Twenty years ago, when I was looking at evangelical Christianity from the inside, it seemed like a movement bursting with energy to spread good news to people. Looking at it from the outside today, this message seems to have been lost in exchange for an aggressive political strategy that demonizes segments of society.

*Brandon, 32*

**PERCEPTION** **Christians are primarily motivated by a political agenda and promote right-wing politics.**

**NEW PERCEPTION** **Christians are characterized by respecting people, thinking biblically, and finding solutions to complex issues.**

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Have you ever played the word-association game?

Just to refresh your memory, it works like this: someone mentions a word or phrase, and you must name the first thing or person that comes to mind. For instance, if you hear the phrase *Chicago Bulls*, whom or what do you think of? What about *Scientology*? *Islam*?

Now, consider Christianity. In our survey, we asked young people to identify the best-known Christians, encouraging respondents to mention anyone who came to mind. Among sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds outside of Christianity, the top five leader associations included the Pope (mentioned by 16 percent of young outsiders), George W. Bush (13 percent), Jesus (9 percent), Billy Graham (7 percent), and Martin Luther King Jr. (6 percent).

Among young churchgoers, the top three included Mr. Graham (29 percent), followed by the Pope (17 percent) and the president (17 percent). Young Christians also mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. (8 percent), Jesus (7 percent), Mother Teresa (7 percent), Mel Gibson (7 percent), and James Dobson (5 percent). There were smaller levels of awareness for other Christian leaders.

What is your impression of these findings? It is ironic, of course, that Jesus is not at the top of these lists of “famous Christians.” Given the fact that the survey was focused on “present-day Christianity,” perhaps young people did not think to mention the original.

Still, did you notice that George W. Bush is more likely to be thought of as a Christian leader than are clergy or other influential Christians? In another portion of our research, we found that half of young outsiders said they could think of specific Christian leaders in politics, which means outsiders recognize Christians in politics more readily than in any other sector, including music, movies, sports, or business. Even young churchgoers are more likely to recognize famous Christians involved in politics than other arenas, except music.

In some ways, it is not surprising that politicians are so frequently linked to beliefs and to faith. Christians have made a concerted and coordinated effort to engage the political process in recent decades, so their activity in the political realm can be hard to miss. This profile is intensified in part because the faith of candidates becomes a news item during campaigns. Since political decisions affect every citizen’s life, the connection between politics and faith—as well as the link between people’s perceptions of the political environment and their views of Christians—is inescapable.

And so for these reasons and others I will discuss in this chapter, Christians are now perceived among Mosaics and Busters as too involved in politics. To be more precise, they think of us as motivated primarily by political goals and as promoting a right-wing agenda.

The fact that there is consternation among young people about the role of religion in politics probably does not surprise you. The important questions are why young outsiders believe Christians are motivated by a political agenda, whether any of the concerns are legitimate, and what should be done, if anything at all, about the perception.

### **A COMPLETE PICTURE**

Let me provide a more complete description of how outsiders feel about Christians. But first you should realize that my goal is not to suggest that Christians should neglect or ignore politics. The political arena is a crucial setting for influencing culture and an important domain for expressing a Christian worldview. On the other hand, we must not be defensive or dismissive about this issue. Yes, sometimes the resentment that outsiders feel stems from the fact that Christians embrace a different set of political perspectives that are not popular. It is also easy for outsiders to resent the times when Christians have been effective in winning elections or in securing legislative victories. Over the last few decades, Christian voters have had quite a dramatic influence on elections, and citizens have frequently selected Christian candidates.

But there is more to it than that. Though Christians have won votes and shaped legislation, this does not ultimately define the success of a Christ follower. We are representatives of Jesus to every person in our culture, regardless of whether we agree politically. Our lives should reflect Jesus, which includes not just *how* we vote, but every element of our political engagement—our conversations about politics as well as our attitudes about ideological opponents. This may seem obvious, but based on our research on this subject, we must realize that our political activism, if expressed in an unChristian manner, prevents a new generation from seeing Christ.

At the very least, we must come to grips with the sheer scope of the issue. The number of young people in our culture who now embrace unflattering perspectives about Christians and politics is astounding. Three-quarters of young outsiders and half of young churchgoers describe present-day Christianity as “too involved in politics.” Nearly two-thirds of Mosaic and Buster outsiders and nearly half of young born-again Christians said they perceive “the political efforts of conservative Christians” to be a problem facing America. The conclusion is that millions

of young people in their twenties and thirties, including many young Christians, are growing impatient with and feeling disconnected from the political activism of many in the church. We have no tracking measures to determine how this perception may differ from that of, say, ten or twenty years ago, yet it is an unmistakable and unavoidable part of our current environment.

In our exploration of this subject, we also discovered that such concerns are not only the domain of young Mosaics and Busters. One-fifth of all American adults (21 percent) believe “the political efforts of conservative Christians” are a major problem facing the country today. Half of the adult population (48 percent) describe the political involvement of Christians as a concern. The number of people who embrace this perception is significant. More than 110 million adult Americans admit they maintain misgivings about the role of “conservative Christians” in politics.

### Young Adults Are Concerned about Conservative Christians in Politics

Percent who believe conservative Christians are a “major” or “minor” problem facing America today

<b>Outsiders</b>	Mosaic/Buster	62%
	Boomer/Elder	48%
<b>Born-Again Christians</b>	Mosaic/Buster	47%
	Boomer/Elder	40%

The Barna Group, Ltd./OmniPoll<sup>SM</sup> 2007

We should also be willing to examine our role in politics because many Christians think this way themselves. Many believers, including faith segments we define as evangelicals and other born-again Christians, admitted that they perceive the politics of conservative Christians as a challenge facing the country. The study showed that one-sixth of born-again Christians (17 percent) firmly embrace this viewpoint, while nearly half have some degree of concern.<sup>1</sup>

Christians need to be aware of their reputation in this arena, not only because it influences their political engagement, but because it affects their ability to connect with new generations who are innately

skeptical of people who appear to use political power to protect their interests and viewpoints. This perception may not always be accurate, but it contributes to outsiders' mistrust of Christians.

The stakes are high. Future elections are likely to be shaped by these attitudes, as will the outcomes of the spiritual search of millions of young adults.

What makes the perception of Christians in politics so difficult to address is that Christians themselves have a hard time agreeing. They disagree not only about the issues but also about the very nature of politics and the role that Christians ought to play. This book does not attempt to address those debates. And if it appears to enter such disputes, it is for the purpose of uncovering what Mosaics and Busters really think and experience related to Christianity and politics.

Instead, my goal is to give Christians greater clarity about engaging the political sphere as well as insights into how our efforts create a (largely negative) reputation for Christianity and how this affects friends and neighbors. I am trying to spur our thinking and engagement in appropriate ways and do not want to discourage Christ followers from participating in politics.

Yet as Christians, we have much to learn about engaging in the right ways and for the right reasons. Based on the data we have been collecting for the last three years, I believe we have to reconsider our strategies and approaches related to politics, or we risk losing appropriate forms of political influence and damaging our credibility in representing Jesus to outsiders.

To address the deep challenges that are facing people in our nation and around the world, Gabe and I have come to the conclusion that being politically engaged is more important than ever. As I discussed in chapter 6, Christians should be known as engaged, informed, and on the leading edge, offering a sophisticated response to issues. Being engaged in politics is a way of doing just that.

Of course, politics is not the only area of influence—it may not even be the most important—but politics does have a significant impact on our lives. The research we conduct at Barna consistently demonstrates that laws and legislation play an important role in creating social and moral boundaries, even though Americans may not always adhere to the rules and may gripe about the restrictions. You cannot change an individual's morality through legislation, but the reality is that laws deeply

affect our culture and create social expectations for the people living in it. Political involvement, messy and confusing as it can be, is an important avenue of influence within our community, nation, and world. Christians should be motivated by faith in every dimension of life, and politics is no exception.

If only it were that simple.

## COMPLEXITY

The arena of politics is difficult and controversial because of the diversity and complexity of the culture and the issues that consume us. Unfortunately, it's not unusual for people to turn intricate realities of the political landscape into simplistic clichés.

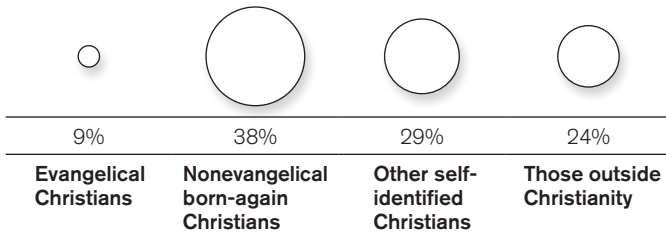
After the last few razor-close presidential elections, we have heard much about “red” and “blue” states. Identifying red states and blue states may give a reasonable snapshot of how our nation selects its president, but often the red-blue story masks huge differences in what motivates people to vote, not to mention where Republicans and Democrats actually live. Often in the bluest of states, red voters represent a significant slice of the population and vice versa. For instance, California, the biggest state, is seen as a blue state, and it typically supports Democratic candidates. However, because of its size, there are more red voters living there than in any other state in the nation.

Christian voters are frequent victims of oversimplification. Sometimes journalists, pundits, politicians, or other experts who have little context or understanding of the faith community develop simplistic explanations. However, Christians who do not appreciate the complexities of the nation's population also make sweeping generalizations—usually about those outside of Christianity but sometimes about the Christian community as well. In other words, everyone makes assumptions about the size and motivations of the Christian community.

The reality is that the Christian electorate is incredibly diverse. For instance, one way of analyzing the electorate is to divide it into four faith segments: evangelical Christians; nonevangelical born-again Christians; other self-identified Christians; and outsiders. In the chart below, the circles represent these four groups, shown in proportion to their size.

### Four Faith Slices of the Voting Population

Percent of registered voters (N = 5,067):



The Barna Group, Ltd. / OmniPoll<sup>SM</sup>, 2006–7

One of the first things you may notice is that evangelicals represent the smallest portion of the voting population—about one-tenth of registered voters. Many other researchers use self-identification to define the evangelical audience; that is, people who embrace the term *evangelical* to define themselves are assumed to have the beliefs and convictions of an evangelical.<sup>2</sup> This would not be a problem except, when we have used this approach in our research—asking people if they consider themselves to be evangelical—some will say that they are, even though they do not hold to some of the most basic beliefs that ought to define such a believer.

At Barna we classify people as evangelicals based on what an individual believes about a handful of core theological perspectives. First, a person must be a born-again Christian, which means he or she has made a confession of sin and profession of faith in Christ. Second, we define evangelicals as those who also believe that the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches, who view God as all-powerful and perfect and involved in the world today, who contend that Jesus did not sin, who assert that Satan is a real spiritual being, who reject that heaven can be earned through good works, who believe Christians have a responsibility to share their faith with others, and who say their religious faith is very important in their life.<sup>3</sup> I realize this is a detailed way of defining a group of people. The point of our surveys is not to determine someone's spiritual fate but to try to analyze and understand the nuanced role of faith in our culture.

Still, the beliefs Barna measures as part of our “evangelical” definition are not minor points of theology. And what people believe matters. It af-

fects how they view the world, how they see their place in it, and how they respond to situations and opportunities. In a moment we will examine why these perspectives are so important when it comes to politics.

Back to the slices of the voting population: besides evangelicals, the two largest groups of voters are also Christian-leaning segments—nonevangelical born-again Christians and other self-identified Christians. Nonevangelicals are those who have born-again commitment but do not share other faith perspectives (for example, they reject the reality of Satan or they do not believe the Bible is entirely accurate). Combined, these two groups make up two-thirds of the voting population.

The final group is outsiders, who make up about one-fourth of voters. As I mentioned in chapter 1, outsiders represent a nearly double proportion of young adults, so the growing size and influence of outsiders among young voters should not be overlooked. Their burgeoning ranks will change American politics in the decades to come.

The study of politics and faith is made even more complex because each faith segment votes in diverse and unexpected ways. For instance, among the evangelical segment, only a slight majority are registered Republicans (59 percent). That's a high proportion, but far removed from the monolithic levels one might expect based on media pronouncements or the expectations of Christian leaders. We are projecting, for instance, that in the 2008 election, as many born-again Christians (including both evangelicals and nonevangelicals) will cast a ballot as registered Democrats as will vote as Republicans.<sup>4</sup> Party affiliation does not always translate directly to candidate choice, but it is a reminder that the Christian community is more diverse, less cohesive, and less unified than is typically assumed.

Just as the Christian audience is diverse, we have to understand that a similar reality holds true for the opposite side of the fence. Outsiders have far less political unity, consistency, and commonality than Christians might assume. They are not uniformly antagonistic toward Christians. Their political views are not neat and simple. This has an important implication for Christians: political activism on the part of outsiders is not dead set *against* Christianity.

It is easy to assume that society is divided into “us-versus-them” forces. The reality is much less clear-cut.

**WORLDVIEW POLITICS**

A person's worldview has significant implications for the political sphere. First, realize that most Christian voters do not embrace foundational evangelical perspectives. Gabe and I contend that these essential beliefs matter because they affect how people perceive society and how they interact with the political environment. For instance, without a conviction that the Bible is accurate in its principles, it is difficult to be motivated or informed by biblical ideals when casting a ballot. Without the belief that Satan is a real spiritual adversary, it is easy to lose sight of the larger spiritual realities and confrontations that exist. As Paul says, believers are not fighting against flesh and blood but against supernatural entities (see Eph. 6:12).

And the list continues: if as a Christian, your faith is not your driving motivation, if you do not believe God is still involved in the world today, if you do not perceive any motivation to influence others spiritually for Christ, your political engagement will ring hollow. Millions of Christian voters—representing a *majority* of the electorate—possess these perspectives on a hit-or-miss basis. But without a consistent and thoughtful biblical worldview, the efforts of Christians to engage politically lack an appropriate foundation.

What does this mean for Christians as we try to understand the skepticism of a new generation? One of the most important implications is this: Christians communicate to many audiences at once. As an evangelical, you are not just speaking to evangelicals but also to other born-again Christians, other self-identified Christians, and outsiders. For instance, when a Christian leader appears on television, he is speaking to all four audiences, some of whom understand and resonate with his or her perspectives and others who have no context for understanding the viewpoint.

Here is an appropriate example that emerged in our research. Usually when a Christian talks about being engaged in a battle, this type of metaphor stems from the scriptural references that describe the spiritual world as an epic struggle (see Eph. 6:10–17). Yet outsiders hear this language and become alarmed by the militaristic talk. And consider what happens when *Christians* are exposed to this warfare verbiage without the benefit of understanding Paul's comments in Ephesians. Without context, these individuals may respond in unChristian ways toward outsiders. And

even those with a biblical worldview can internalize this tough talk about spiritual warfare and lose sight of what it means to be full of grace toward skeptics and critics. As James says, “So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others” (James 2:12–13).

This has special relevance for a number of reasons. First, in an era of mass media, blogs, and viral videos, it is important to remember that your words and actions may endure in the blogosphere, on YouTube, or on some other digital destination. This is particularly important for those Christians who appear in media, because the stakes are high. What you say and how you say it are important issues of stewardship. You are representing Christ to outsiders, even as you articulate a Christian perspective. And in the context of a sound bite or a media interview, this is a tough challenge. We cannot seek popularity, but we also cannot ignore the listeners who may be making spiritual conclusions about whether Christianity rings true or not. Even if we are speaking from the context of a biblical worldview, many will not interpret our comments from that same perspective. So it is incumbent on us to present things clearly, creatively, and without clichés. And particularly among Christians, our calls to action must provoke each other to self-examination, humility, and appropriate engagement. With fellow believers who lack a holistic biblical worldview, we have to be particularly cautious not to create attitudes in them or alarm them in ways that give them an excuse to be unChristian.

This is not a concern only for those with public roles. Every pastor plays a part in shaping Christians’ efforts in politics. In your church on any given Sunday, chances are you have all four of the faith slices represented in the audience. How are you communicating so that everyone in the congregation can understand, think about, and respond to social, political, and spiritual issues in appropriate ways? In your sermons as well as in the environments and conversations your church facilitates, are you helping to develop people’s capacity to think, act, and pray in terms of a biblical worldview?

And even if you are not in church work, as a Christian, your co-workers and your neighbors are watching and listening to you. How do you represent what it means to be a Christ follower when it comes to your political choices and preferences? If outsiders criticize Christianity

for being too politicized, are you part of the problem or part of the solution? Be vigilant that your words and actions don't feed the perception of unChristian faith.

## **CLIMATE CHANGES**

It is more important than ever to think about and respond to political issues in light of a biblical worldview. *Mosaics and Busters* are placing a new stamp on political engagement that will require thoughtful, Christlike approaches. If we do not offer them the deep and sophisticated truths of the Christian perspective, we have no chance of connecting with young people's hearts and minds—politically or otherwise.

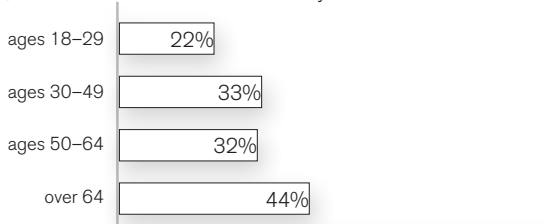
To understand the Mosaic and Buster mindset, let's explore some critical shifts that are taking place in the political environment.

- *Mosaics and Busters express much less traditional political and social views on many issues than did their parents at the same age.* Their views on matters such as homosexuality, media decency standards, sexuality, and family continue to shift away from traditional perspectives.
- *Young people, particularly Mosaics, are driven by pragmatism, a do-what-works mentality.* Young adults are much more likely than are their predecessors to prefer leaders who are willing to compromise to get the job done. This preference stems from their relativistic worldview. For better and for worse, young people embrace decisions that produce greater comfort or the least amount of conflict. The negative reality to this is that they admit to being less principled in their decision making.
- *Mosaics are more skeptical than any previous generation of the role of the Bible in public life.* In one study conducted by the Pew Research Center, young Americans were the least likely age group to say that the Bible ought to be the most significant influence on the laws of the country, instead favoring the “will of the people” as the best way to determine legal boundaries.<sup>5</sup> This preference for majority rule stems from not knowing the Bible's content, questioning its truth, and preferring feelings and expediency to absolutes. Of

course, just because this is the perception does not mean that we abandon the idea that the Bible should help us determine the laws of the nation. But we must realize this is an increasingly rare sentiment among the nation’s younger population.

### What Should Determine the Laws of the Country?

Percent of each age group who believe that the Bible, not the will of the people, should drive the laws of the country:



Pew Research Center

- *Young adults are less likely to support a “Christianized” country.* The increasingly secular mentality of young adults carries over into other arenas as well. Mosaics and Busters are less likely than their predecessors to support keeping the motto “In God We Trust” on our currency, the phrase “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, or the Ten Commandments posted in government buildings. They are also less likely than Boomers and Elders to support teaching creationism in public schools or to favor a federal marriage amendment defining marriage as possible only between one man and one woman.

### Support for a “Christianized” Country

	Mosaics/ Busters	Boomers/ Elders
Strongly oppose removal of “In God We Trust”	61 %	80 %
Strongly oppose removal of “one nation under God”	59	79
Strongly oppose removal of Ten Commandments from government buildings	48	68
Strongly favor federal marriage amendment	29	39
Strongly favor adding the teaching of creationism in public schools	24	32

The Barna Group, Ltd. / OmniPoll<sup>SM</sup>

- *Young adults are embracing a worldview at odds with Scripture.* There are subtle yet powerful worldview shifts taking place all around us. For instance, currently just one-third of twentysomethings believe that humans are superior to other living things created by God, which compares to half of those in their thirties and nearly three-fifths of those over the age of forty. As Christians seek to articulate a biblical perspective of creation care and environmental concerns, we have to realize that the worldview of Mosaics and Busters has shifted, which means the deep-seated philosophies that undergird the political issues are changing.
- *Young adults are less likely than preceding generations to start their political explorations as Republicans.* As people get older, they usually become more politically conservative. Yet the up-and-coming generation is less likely to rally around Republican and politically conservative banners than were people the same age just twenty years ago. Among young adults under age twenty-six, connection to the Republican Party is at its lowest point in two decades.<sup>6</sup>

You may not know about or welcome all these trends, but they represent not-so-subtle shifts in the thinking of Mosaics and Busters, which will place increasing pressure on social conservatives to find electoral traction in the coming decade.

Whether or not we welcome the changes, we have to be aware of them and what a new generation really thinks about Christians and our politics. If we expect to have influence merely by relying on numerical advantage, we are in for a rude awakening as the weight of our views dwindles and the role of those outside the Christian faith increases.

## **METHOD AND ATTITUDE**

Since every group seems to have a political presence and agenda, why should Christians be subject to special criticism? Are outsiders asking us to stay out of politics? According to our research, not exactly. Many outsiders clarified that they believe Christians have a right (even an obligation) to pursue political involvement, but they disagree with our methods and our attitudes. They say we seem to be pursuing an agenda that benefits only ourselves; they assert that we expect too much out of politics; they question whether we are motivated by our economic status

rather than faith perspectives when we support conservative politics; they claim we act and say things in an unChristian manner; they wonder whether Jesus would use political power as we do; and they are concerned that we overpower the voices of other groups.

Let me introduce you to Brandon, one of the young people we interviewed for this project. In relaying his story to us, he described his significant involvement in church as a teenager.

“Sometimes it is a hard for me to reconcile the ‘Christian movement’ with the people I knew from my own days in the church. Today whenever I experience the activities of American Christians as an organized group—and frequently when I interact with them in politics—it is almost always in terms of them trying to use political force to entice people to behave a certain way. Do I believe a Christian has every right to go and vote as he or she believes? Absolutely.

“But twenty years ago,” Brandon continued, “when I was looking at evangelical Christianity from the inside, it seemed like a movement bursting with energy to spread good news to people. Looking at it from the outside today, this message seems to have been lost in exchange for an aggressive political strategy that demonizes segments of society. I believe that American Christians have become tools of the Republican election machine—at the expense of their own image and message.”

Brandon is now an avowed agnostic, living in Arizona. He is also an active member of the Republican Party.

An important insight regarding politics and unChristian faith is that it influences people’s lives, like Brandon’s. *Many issues keep young outsiders from committing to Jesus, but one key barrier is their experience with Christians in politics.*

One outsider we interviewed said he became disillusioned with his church and eventually his faith because he started to question the heavy-handed political involvement that seemed to be a requirement. His comment: “A lot of times the church would take a conservative Republican stance, and anyone who did not fit into that mold was judged as not as good a Christian as everyone else.”

This story was driven home by the survey data. Ideological allegiance plays a prominent role in who feels accepted by Christians and who does not. We found that young outsiders who are politically conservative do not feel as much tension with Christianity as do other outsiders. In other words, if a twentysomething shares sociopolitical

views with conservative Christians, he or she is much less likely to have negative perceptions of Christianity. On one level, there is nothing inherently wrong if Christians find areas of agreement with other young social conservatives, yet our research also indicates that Christians exhibit more patience with young people with whom they share political views—and less charitable attitudes toward outsiders with divergent perspectives. Is it a mere coincidence that young outsiders who are liberal and moderate are most likely to recall having had a negative experience with a Christian that gave them a negative view of Jesus?

One young Christian, Doug, explained how his efforts to connect his neighbors to the message of Jesus had been undermined because of an unfortunate unChristian interaction. “My neighbor came to me the day after the election. He said, ‘Do you know what your Christian friends said to my ten-year-old daughter? They told her she should tell me not to support John Kerry because he supports abortion. Kerry is a baby killer.’ I don’t even want my daughter thinking about abortion, let alone having them talk to her about who to vote for. What kind of Christian is *that*?”

Doug described his frustration: “I had been carefully nurturing a relationship of trust with my neighbor, and much of it was undone because of careless and offensive words to his young daughter about an election.”

The sobering conclusion is that political attitudes and perspectives, when expressed in an unChristian manner, create unintended spiritual barriers between people and Christ.

## **POLITICS, JESUS STYLE**

How do we overcome the perception that Christians are too political? We do not simply change our principles to accommodate people who disagree with us, but we should be willing to look at ourselves in the light of Jesus. We must ask if our political engagement is Christlike. If we are perceived to be *unlike Jesus*, in what ways could our politics reflect his life and priorities more clearly?

Here are five insights about outsiders’ perceptions and how these obscure an authentic picture of Jesus. Remember that some outsiders’ complaints are brought up by people who have an entirely different take on reality or who have a political ax to grind, but not always. The fact

that so many outsiders expressed these perspectives and the fact that they are telling us they get turned off to Christianity because of these issues are powerful signs that we should pay attention to. And besides, with or without criticism, we should always make genuine attempts to think and act in a Christlike manner in every part of our life. Here are some ways to bring balance to our political engagement.

***unChristian:*** *Christians rely too heavily on political influence.*

***Christlike:*** *We are cautious not to place too much emphasis on politics.*

Christians seem to fall on two sides of the path: too political or too apolitical. It is important to find an appropriate balance—neither ignorant and silent nor relying too heavily on political solutions to societal problems. We should make an effort to engage in other culture-shaping activities in addition to politics. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Christians should not isolate themselves from governmental, legal, or legislative influence. Those arenas, however, should receive only part of our attention. In many ways politics follows culture. As ancient Greek musician Damon of Athens said, “Show me the lyric of a nation and it matters not who writes its laws.” Movies, television, books, magazines, the Internet, and music are incredibly significant in shaping the world-views and lifestyles of today’s America. And Christians are expressing a growing awareness and response to these avenues of influence. Where is God calling you to serve him—media, arts and entertainment, politics, education, church, business, science?

***unChristian:*** *Christians get enamored with politics.*

***Christlike:*** *There is nothing gained by winning elections if we lose our soul in the process.*

Involvement in politics is seductive. Many aspects of politics feel like the frenzy of a gold rush. Once you start to influence elections, it is tempting to believe that the church is primarily called to shape the electoral process. Remember Jesus’s principle when he was cornered about paying taxes? He said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God” (Matt. 22:21). In another episode, Jesus asked this penetrating question: “What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” (16:26). It is important that,

in trying to achieve political ends, we do not sacrifice our integrity by using unChristian means.

**unChristian:** *Christians drown out and demonize the voices of others.*

**Christlike:** *Respect our enemies and be aware of our capacity for myopia.*

Guard your attitudes and what you say about outsiders. Our political engagement should not be the only yardstick by which outsiders measure our faith. Our words and actions shape people's experiences and impressions of Jesus. We found that only 9 percent of young outsiders describe Christians as "people they trust a lot." As we probed the reasons for this, the most frequent answer was our involvement in politics. The political process encourages, even thrives on, assumptions about the opposition. Misreading (and sometimes misrepresenting) the motivations of others is part of the "business." What are you doing to facilitate conversations with people you don't agree with? Just asking what they think about certain issues, without having an "agenda" to change their mind, might shift their perceptions of you. Be willing to talk with Christians of different racial and ethnic backgrounds about their political persuasions. Chances are their perspectives will challenge you. Learn how their views of politics and culture are shaping their engagement with the world.

**unChristian:** *Christians do not respect leaders whose political viewpoint is different from their own.*

**Christlike:** *Respect and listen to our leaders and pray for them.*

In our research we found that many outsiders pointed out our inconsistency by saying that Christians seem ugly and rude toward political opponents. Yet Scripture makes it clear that our responsibility as citizens is to pray for our leaders and makes no allowance for their party affiliation or views (see 1 Tim. 2:1–3). Whom do you trust more—a born-again Christian whose sociopolitical stances are different from yours or someone of a different faith who happens to share your political views? Who is more "right"? It strikes me as unChristian that we often have more charitable attitudes toward ideological allies than

we do toward brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we disagree on matters of politics.

***unChristian:*** *Christians are hypocrites when it comes to politics.*

***Christlike:*** *In trying to solve problems in society, be vigilant about our own capacity for hypocrisy.*

Insincerity and duplicity in the political realm are particularly obvious to outsiders. One survey respondent made this intriguing observation: “This always strikes me as ironic—you have a Christian talk about how a majority of Americans support something, like school prayer, or that most Americans do not support homosexual marriage. But then in the same conversation they say politics should not be a matter of majority rule because Americans are morally relativistic. You can’t have it both ways, people.” This underscores how closely many outsiders pay attention to our words and arguments, and it highlights the fact that hypocrisy related to political issues is a major unChristian barrier. Many outsiders say that their problem with Christians in politics is that lives don’t match words. Here are some examples of the comments outsiders made:

- “Christians don’t even follow what the Bible says; why do they try to tell everyone else how to live morally?”
- “They do not seem to prioritize the poor and needy in their political agenda, as Jesus commands.”
- “Christians do a lot of complaining about the society and how bad things are in politics, but they don’t do much more than complain. The point is that you have to offer more than an opinion.”
- “Christians talk about being driven by family values when they vote, but a lot of their families are in bad shape too.”
- “They run the risk of turning people away from the cause they are trying to promote by losing sight of real people. Christians do not show grace toward people. They judge their actions without walking in their shoes.”

Outsiders may not always come to the right conclusions about Christians, but many describe us perfectly. Moreover, even if they don’t

have it all correct, it is a sad fact that we do not give them sufficient evidence to the contrary.

## **ENGAGING POLITICS**

What are the issues and problems that God is leading you to address? It may be the rampant access to and use of pornography, issues of justice in the United States or in developing countries, the plight of the poor in our community, educational policy or curricula in our schools, the moral perspectives exhibited in today's media, the care and nurture of the environment, the need for more Christians to adopt and provide foster care to children in need, exposing more Christians to the international church, increasing awareness of human trafficking around the world. Being involved could range from working for a campaign to serving on the school board.

Rather than being known for criticism, let's learn to step in and work toward a solution for the problems we see. As Michelangelo said, "Critique by creating."

My friend Kimble is getting involved in politics. He's running for public office in our city, despite the costs to his time, money, and energy. His faith has activated his political involvement. Kimble explained, "I think a lot of Christians would really be motivated by the things I am passionate about, and I want to make a positive difference."

After studying the perspectives of outsiders, I cautioned him: "Keep in mind that politics only gets you so far. You change people's lives most deeply by transforming their hearts, by helping them embrace a passionate, thoughtful, personal connection to Jesus."

Kimble and I don't always agree on every topic. But we frequently discuss how a biblical worldview affects his aspiring political career.



Download the results of research showing the views young born-again Christians have on current social and political issues at [www.unchristian.com/fermi](http://www.unchristian.com/fermi)

## CHANGING THE PERCEPTIONS

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### GAINING THE WORLD, LOSING THE SOUL

From a vantage point further in the future, I think that an honest diagnosis will tell the truth about the pivotal role the Religious Right has played in these depressing statistics. In the aftermath of the Religious Right's ascendancy, it is not an accident that "antihomosexual" is the number one perception of Christians in America these days, followed closely by "judgmental" and "hypocritical" and "insensitive." Young people today could, if we had taken a wiser path for the last few decades, think "antipoverty" or "pro-environment" or "pro-fidelity" or "antiviolence" when they hear "Christian" or "evangelical." But because of the path influential people have taken over the last thirty years or so, what young people think of the Religious Right is what they think about evangelicals and even Christians in general.

That's why some of us believe that leaders in the Religious Right have, in a classic case of gaining the world and losing the soul, successfully gained political clout but helped lose our next generation.

But even so, a diagnosis of the evaporation of Christian commitment in the West and a prescription about how to respond must go deeper than complaining about the mistakes of the Religious Right. There are many factors, and they run deep. As for prescriptions, yes, we need more Bible—but we also need a better, more holistic and profound understanding of the Bible and what it says about justice, compassion, the future, power, poverty, money, war, sex, and the kingdom of God. Yes, we need more maturity—but we also need a better

and more holistic maturity, a maturity willing to face the historic and social realities of our so-called Christian past: a past that includes anti-Semitism, racism, chauvinism, holocaust, colonialism, apartheid, slavery, attempted genocide of native peoples, and much else that is ugly and calls not for excuses and minimization but for forthright repentance. Yes, we need more discernment and missional engagement—but we also need better discernment that goes beyond name-calling and making pronouncements on two or three issues.

The data presented here can help us greatly in this regard, prompting us to discern how deep and serious the problems are, so that our missional engagement in the coming years won't be more of the same.

**Brian McLaren**

founding member, emergentvillage.com

## **CHRISTIANS AND IDEOLOGY**

On the role of Christians in politics, I have done a few unscientific polls myself with young people. It's easy to see that they are turned off by right-winged politics—which is very unfortunate.

Unfortunately, nearly every political issue that Christians are associated with today is from the defensive position. For instance, the abortion issue developed when the Supreme Court ruled that states could no longer decide when life begins, resulting in abortion being legalized. Since then, over twenty established moral conventions have been overturned by state legislatures, and Christians have responded, rightly so. The challenge has been that in defending these, we haven't done a very good job and, at times, we present an ugly picture. We come across even worse than the people attacking us.

The media has also contributed to feeding this perception. Recently there have been over twelve books written about theocracy and several different media appearances by the authors—although I

have never met a Christian who believes in theocracy. We don't believe in that; we believe in pluralism. Yet the press has really painted us into a corner.

In my book *Kingdoms in Conflict*, I make the case for why Christians should never have a political party. It is a huge mistake to become married to an ideology, because the greatest enemy of the gospel is ideology. Ideology is a man-made format of how the world ought to work, and Christians instead believe in the revealed truth of Scripture.

**Chuck Colson**

founder, Prison Fellowship Ministries

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## AN APOLITICAL CHURCH

I have the privilege of serving a congregation in the heart of democracy. Our flagship location, Union Station, is located four blocks from the Capitol. More than 70 percent of our congregation is made up of twentysomethings. And many of them are congressional staffers who work on Capitol Hill. They live, eat, and breathe politics all day, all week.

From day one, National Community Church has tried to remain absolutely apolitical. That doesn't mean we don't talk about issues. Issues such as the sanctity of life or the sacredness of marriage aren't political issues. They are moral issues. So we talk about them. But we are hyper-careful not to align ourselves with a particular politician or political party. And that apolitical approach has resulted in amazing political diversity. NCC is nearly equally divided between political parties.

I just don't think pastors should turn their pulpits into public policy platforms. It cheapens the gospel. Our congregation doesn't need another political opinion. They need spiritual revelation. They

don't need to think about politics on the weekend. They need to be reminded to *seek first the kingdom of God*.

Political diversity is part of our DNA at NCC. And it's most evident in our small groups. We have a free market system of small groups that empowers leaders to get a vision from God and go for it. While we would never endorse a group that goes outside the guardrails of Scripture, we make room for leaders who have varying passions depending on their theological persuasion. In other words, we're not black and white where Scripture is gray. Most semesters we have a variety of social justice groups that revolve around a variety of issues. And not all of those groups see eye to eye. But our primary role as spiritual leaders isn't making people see eye to eye. It's making sure our eyes are focused on Jesus.

**Mark Batterson**

pastor, National Community Church

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## **PROMOTE JESUS, NOT POLITICS**

The religious leaders of the day attempted to trap Jesus by challenging him on his political stance. They asked him, "Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Scripture tells us that Jesus saw through their *duplicity*, telling them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Historically the church has struggled with the paradigm of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. Trying to combine the two is like attempting to mix oil and water. Church history has been consistent on this matter. Every time Christianity has fallen into the trap of using politics to achieve its means, it has lost its power and effectiveness. Relevant Christianity never loses sight of the reality that in the kingdom of God, everything is upside down when contrasted with the world's pursuits. In God's kingdom the greatest is the least; the first is the last; we are to love

our enemies; and to be most effective, we are called to servanthood rather than to positions of political power and correctness.

John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Church movement, once said that if people truly have a relationship with Jesus, they will always vote for the right things ("right" as in ethically and morally correct). He said that our job as followers of Christ was to promote Jesus, not political bias. Getting involved politically can potentially derail our effectiveness, causing us to lose focus on our true vision, thus weakening our cause.

As an involved participant in the Christian environmental movement, I have endeavored to stay nonpolitical. For me, the care of God's creation is purely a biblical matter of obedient stewardship. The world has politically polarized an issue that should be of great concern to every human being. The global environmental condition is an issue that has become a primary cause of human suffering in developing nations. Knowing that Christ has called his people to a ministry of compassion, mercy, and social justice, we cannot allow ourselves to be caught in the duplicity of religion and politics at such a crucial hour. Our effectiveness will come only through authentic biblical conviction and the faith to act on it.

**Tri Robinson**

pastor, Vineyard Boise, Boise, Idaho

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## THE NEW POLITICAL FRONTIER

After sixteen years on Capitol Hill as a leading and visible evangelical, the signs are not difficult to read. Young evangelicals born after 1963 are leaving the fold. And they are running as fast as they can.

What are they running from? The perception of an intolerant, unpopular, uncaring, and narrow Religious Right? And if they are running away, what are they running to?

The shift has been subtle and gradual, but I feel like it has accelerated in the past few years. I spent hours on the phone with leading young evangelicals in 2004, convincing them that President Bush would be better for the country, and for those concerned about abortion, than Senator John Kerry. Liberal Democrats, despite opposing a federal marriage amendment and supporting legal abortion rights, appear to be gaining attention and traction among many young and growing evangelical communities.

I cut my teeth on politics in 1984 on a successful Texas challenger race for the US Congress. Groups like the Christian Voice, Freedom Council, and the Moral Majority were created as responses to the Supreme Court ratification of abortion on demand. A political action required a political reaction. If we were going to confront the horror of abortion, there was no other avenue, no greater priority, than political engagement.

Politics was not an option, they said, but an obligation.

Sixteen years later, six of which I spent as the third-highest ranking Republican staffer in the Senate, the sands have shifted, and so has my thinking. It appears that conservative evangelical involvement in politics is being rejected by the under-forty evangelical community, which seems to be pursuing alternative forms of engagement as well as issues not traditionally associated with the Religious Right. I believe that one of the key reasons they are rejecting the Religious Right is not that they fundamentally differ on issues like abortion and marriage (yet), but in part because they are uncomfortable with its perceived narrow and limited agenda and its unpopularity among the cultural elite. It is as much the perception of a sin of omission (the issues not addressed) by the Religious Right that is causing them to disaffiliate as it is a sin of commission (the tactics or positions).

When the Christian Coalition refused to hire an executive director because he wanted global AIDS to be on their agenda, and another director resigned for similar reasons, the fate of the Religious Right was sealed.

This is not entirely a bad thing. The senator I worked for was defeated by a pro-life Democrat, and as much as I believe the country

would have been better off if he had been reelected, I pray that this will leaven the Democrat party. The kingdom of God is not captured by either party, and it is a dangerous moment for the church and the gospel when a temporal power is confused with the higher power.

In addition, politics is not everything. We are not going to set aright the sexual revolution on the floor of the Senate. We need new and “saltier” forms of cultural engagement.

My concern, however, is that we could be in danger of losing the next generation of evangelicals over time on “first things” principles, such as life beginning at conception and marriage as one man and one woman, while they look for places to express their concern over issues such as poverty, AIDS, and the environment.

Can evangelicalism navigate these new frontiers? Or will this be a breakup—a civil war within a tradition that has been largely unified by a deep-rooted sense of the moral order? We must avoid an internal struggle that distracts from a common cause and drains precious resources that otherwise should be spent to combat injustice, poverty, and cultural decay?

These are questions largely for the under-forty crowd to answer as the current leadership begins to retire from public life. The ball is in their court. It will take conversation, prayer, humility, fellowship, and grace. But with the Holy Spirit at the helm, we can come out on the other side of the rapids stronger and broader.

**Mark Rodgers**

former staff director, Senate Republican Conference  
president, The Clapham Group

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## NOT LEFT OR RIGHT—DEEPER

Christians should be involved in politics. The question isn't “should we engage?” but “how?”

The conservative religious movement in America today has been politically corrupted. Evangelicalism has been hijacked and usurped by partisan political forces. Conservative religion is now being driven and dictated by secular, right-wing political forces. So basically, the conservative religious movement—or at least parts of it, the politicized part of it—has sold its soul to partisan politics.

Many young evangelicals see that this is just Republican politics masquerading as conservative religion. When they observe this, they don't like it. And they are concerned it could happen on the Left too—exactly what happened on the Right—the politicizing and corrupting of religion for the sake of political power. That's not what they want.

The young people I meet don't want to go Left or Right. They reject these narrow political orthodoxies. They're not happy with Christianity being either a list of things you shouldn't do, or just about being nice. They want to go deeper.

Instead, young evangelicals really want their faith and lives to count for something. They want their faith to somehow connect with changing the world; they want their love of Jesus to express itself in the world, in relationship to other people, and in the pressing demands and problems of the world. I find this to be true among younger and younger people.

The kind of privatized faith that's just about “me and the Lord” is not enough for young evangelicals. Experience tells us that you can't call something a revival until it has changed society in some way; personal renewal is not enough. There's a new hunger for revival, a hunger to participate in a world-changing faith and movement, which I haven't seen for a long time.

In the end, social movements are what change politics—and the best movements always have spiritual foundations. With his Bible in one hand and the US Constitution in the other, Martin Luther King Jr. changed the wind in our nation, inspiring a whole generation to engage in the struggle for civil rights. The politicians came around last, as they often do.

**Jim Wallis**

founder and executive director, Sojourners/Call to Renewal

## TEACHING KINGDOM PRINCIPLES

In today's church, one reason young people are disillusioned with the role of Christians in politics is because we often teach them only part of God's statutes, not all—and we rarely teach them kingdom principles. We are quick to teach about judgment, self-righteousness, and our perception of holiness, but we often leave out the kingdom principles of love, compassion, justice, and the sovereignty of Christ in shaping our political affairs.

We teach our own political traditions—instead of the ways of Christ—becoming enforcer, judge, and jury toward the sinful lives of others. We seem to forget that we all are sinners saved by grace—a loving, compassionate, merciful Grace who did not try to legislate hell out of us nor give us what we deserved, but who gave his Son as a substitute, a redeemer for our sins.

Make no mistake—there are principalities, powers, rulers of this dark age, against which the church must stand. But we wrestle not against the flesh and blood of our fellow humans who sin.

For each generation, God has a sovereign plan for their role in the political process. We do a disservice to the coming generations if we try to force our political methods and mindset on the issues they face. If we teach our children all the statutes of God and things pertaining to his kingdom—although it may mean putting aside our own ways of doing things—we can trust that God's purposes for the coming generation will be fulfilled.

**Rev. Jannah Scott**

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