

THREE BOOKS ON POLITICS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

Andrew David Naselli and Charles Naselli

Andy Naselli (PhD, Bob Jones University; PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is Research Manager for D. A. Carson, Administrator of *Themelios*, and adjunct faculty at several seminaries. Charles Naselli, Andy's father, is founder and President of Global Recruiters of Greenville in South Carolina. He has been an engineer, corporate executive, and entrepreneur, and has had an abiding interest in politics since the early 1970s.

Wayne Grudem. *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. 619 pp. \$39.99.

Carl R. Trueman. *Republocrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010. xxvii + 110 pp. \$9.99.

Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner. *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era*. Edited by Timothy Keller and Collin Hansen. Cultural Renewal. Chicago: Moody, 2010. 140 pp. \$19.99.

Evangelical publishers released three new books on politics this fall, and they are sure to stir up controversy. People will invariably react differently to them because people have diverse worldviews and life-experiences. If a man works all day in a cubicle next to obnoxious, non-intellectual, right-wing conspiracy-theorists whose primary source of political information comes from opinionators like Glenn Beck, he might be sick of politics and be tempted to vote Democrat in protest! On the other hand, if he rarely interacts with people like that and instead regularly reads the best of conservative politics (e.g., *National Review*), he might feel insulted when someone from the Left broadly attacks the entire Right without engaging the best conservative arguments (this partially explains our evaluation of Carl Trueman's book!). Some people despise how they were politically indoctrinated while growing up and predictably rebel by voting the other way. Others remain immovably committed to a particular political party because of a vivid event or experience that happened decades ago. Some Christians are discouraged by how their churches elevate politics while others are discouraged by how their churches never say a word about any issue that is remotely political. Some have given up on politics altogether. But nearly everyone has an opinion about politics, so writing about both religion and politics is a recipe for wrangling.

1. Wayne Grudem, Politics

This is a 600-page textbook on politics by a theologian who has taught the Bible on the MDiv and PhD levels for nearly thirty years, first focusing on the New Testament and then branching out to systematic theology. Grudem's book focuses on politics in the United States, but much of the book applies internationally. His positions are "conservative" (not "liberal") and line up for the most part with the Republican Party, but his "primary purpose" is "to explain a biblical worldview and a biblical perspective on issues of politics, law, and government" (p. 13).¹

1.1. Tracing the Argument

The book has three parts: basic principles (chs. 1–5), specific issues (chs. 6–15), and concluding observations (chs. 16–18). This section surveys each chapter's argument:

1. Five views about Christians and government are wrong: (a) government should compel religion; (b) government should exclude religion; (c) all government is evil and demonic; (d) do evangelism, not politics; and (e) do politics, not evangelism.

2. Christians should significantly influence government. Pastors in particular are responsible to teach wisely on political issues.

3. There are many biblical principles concerning government. For example, government should punish evil and encourage good, and citizens should obey government except in certain circumstances.

4. A biblical worldview is foundational to a proper view of politics.

5. The single most pressing political issue in the United States is whether the courts should have ultimate power. The role of judges is to judge laws according to the Constitution, not to *make* laws. But Supreme Court justices, who are not accountable to anyone, are now creating laws based on their own ideas of what is good for the nation (e.g., *Roe v. Wade*) instead of interpreting and applying the Constitution's original intent. "Voting for Republican candidates for state and national positions is the best way—in fact, the only way known to me—to bring about a change and break the rule of unaccountable judges over our society" (p. 154).

6. Government should protect life by prohibiting abortion and euthanasia, enforcing capital punishment, and allowing citizens to own guns. "Every vote for every Democratic candidate for President or Congress undeniably has the effect of continuing to protect 1,000,000 abortions per year in the United States" (p. 177).

7. Government should define marriage as between only one man and woman.

8. Parents, not government, are primarily responsible for their children. Government should support parents with school vouchers and the freedom to discipline their children.

9. Capitalism is the best economic system. The United States would benefit from fewer and lower taxes, gradually privatized Social Security, and privatized health care.

¹ Throughout this article pagination in the body refers to the corresponding book under review.

10. Radical environmentalism is wrong. “*There is no good reason to think we will ever run out of any essential natural resource*” (p. 329, emphasis in original). We should use a variety of energy resources (including oil and nuclear power), and government should not regulate carbon fuel because man-made global warming is unproven and unlikely and because the proposed solutions that accompany it are destructive for our economy and liberty.

11. Nations must defend themselves with military power in “just wars” (e.g., the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting international terrorism). The United States should have a strong military (including nuclear weapons and a missile-defense system), support the CIA, and allow coercive interrogations of prisoners with certain limits.

12. A nation’s foreign policy should primarily protect and defend that nation and secondarily do good for other nations by, for example, promoting freedom and human rights. The Obama administration has unwisely encouraged enemies (e.g., Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela) and undermined friends (e.g., Colombia, Honduras, and Israel). The United States should minimize the influence of the United Nations because it is corrupt and dominated by anti-American, anti-Israel, anti-democratic countries. “We should treat Israel as a very special and close ally” (p. 467). The United States should close the borders and reform the immigration system.

13. Campaign-finance reform, “hate speech” codes, and the “fairness doctrine” wrongly restrict the freedom of speech.

14. Government should allow people to freely express their religion in the public square to a greater degree, continue “faith-based” programs, and not restrict tax-exempt entities like churches from advocating specific political candidates.

15. Government should stop favoring special groups through earmarks, affirmative action, gender-based quotas, farm subsidies, tariffs, tort law, the National Education Association, reservations for Native Americans, and gambling.

16. The mainstream media is strongly biased against conservatives and in favor of liberals, which is “like having a country protected by watchdogs that cannot bark” (p. 571).

17. “The teachings of the Bible, as I understand them, mostly support the current policies of the Republicans” (pp. 573–74). (This nineteen-page chapter summarizes the conclusions in chapters 5–16 and compares current Democratic and Republican policies for each issue.)

18. Christians should trust God’s sovereignty over politics. In the United States there are both negative signs of God’s impending judgment and positive signs of God’s blessing.

1.2. Strengths

1. *Politics* is shrewdly Bible-based. Grudem presents biblical arguments well and usefully distinguishes them from extra-biblical ones. Christian readers will want to know both sorts of arguments so that they know what the Bible teaches and ways they should advance that in the public square.

2. Grudem qualifies that the Bible does not explicitly address some of the issues he addresses. For example, he begins chapter 15 (which addresses specific political issues like farm subsidies) with an important caveat:

These issues all involve the general question, “What is the best way to do good for the nation in this area of its life?” Therefore the answers I give do not come directly from moral principles of the Bible or from biblical teachings that speak directly to the issue, but instead from an evaluation of whether a certain policy truly fulfills the government purpose of doing good for the nation as a whole. This chapter discusses issues where a proper decision depends on *evaluating the results* of certain policies and actions. . . .

Therefore this chapter covers topics in which even Christians who fully believe the Bible will probably find that they have more sincerely held differences of opinion. When I argue for or against a policy based on the *results* of that policy, people will differ about exactly what the results are, how helpful or harmful they are, and what the results would be from changing the policy. In the nature of that kind of argument, there are going to be different evaluations and different proposed solutions.

To put it briefly, these topics are less directly based on specific teachings of Scripture, and therefore I think that in churches, people should be willing to hear and evaluate arguments from different sides, all within the broad parameters of encouraging government to seek the good of the nation as a whole. (pp. 513–14, emphasis in original)

3. *Politics*, a reference-work, is organized very clearly with an outline-style similar to Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.

4. *Politics* is accessible. It makes complicated issues easy to understand. It could be a textbook for a freshman college course, and many high-school students could handle it.

5. Grudem argues clearly and succinctly. His arguments are easy to follow.

6. In most cases Grudem argues persuasively (at least to us!). For a young person (or an older person taking a fresh interest in politics), this book is a healthy corrective to the inculcated biases of the education and media establishment.

7. The book’s breadth and depth are impressive.

8. Grudem’s tone is civil and his argumentation respectable.

1.3. Weaknesses

1. Grudem does not always clarify the relative importance of the sixty issues he discusses. He acknowledges, “I do not hold with equal confidence every position I support in this book,” and he distinguishes three tiers of importance: (1) issues on which “the overall teaching of the Bible is *clear, direct, and decisive*,” such as abortion; (2) issues that “depend on *arguments from broader principles*,” such as democracy; and (3) arguments that “*appeal to facts in the world*,” such as economics and environmentalism. But he admits that in the book, “I have not distinguished these three types of argument” (pp. 18–19, emphasis in original). The book would be better if he did. In this sense the book’s title is misleading because it over-promises; it implies that there is one “biblical” position on each political issue, but the Bible does not clearly

address some of the issues this book discusses. To Grudem’s credit, he acknowledges this in some places (see strength #2 above), but the general tone of the book is that the positions it advocates are what the Bible teaches either directly or by implication. But there is a big difference between what the Bible explicitly teaches and what the Bible might imply in a specific circumstance; there is no room for disagreement on the former, but there is on the latter.

2. Some arguments are not supported convincingly. For example, he cites correlations that do not prove causality: (1) the United States should return prayer to public schools because the seven leading school problems in 1940 are mundane compared to 1990 (pp. 505–7); (2) “our children are growing fatter and lazier and less adventuresome every year *as a result*” of our society fearing lawsuits and making everything “excessively safe” (p. 542, emphasis added).

3. Some sections of the book depend heavily if not solely on just one or two sources (e.g., pp. 401–9; cf. 332–61).

1.4. Verdict

The book’s strengths outweigh its weaknesses. *Politics* is wide-ranging, so nearly everyone will disagree with something in it. But as Grudem has done with other massive projects and complicated subjects,² he has once again served the church well by producing a relatively comprehensive tome that is clear, accessible, and persuasive.

2. Carl Trueman, Republicrat

This is a 137-page paperback on politics by a British historical theologian who immigrated to the United States in 2001, so it is not surprising that Trueman’s book frequently contrasts politics in the United States with the United Kingdom. He disagrees with both the Left and Right on various issues—he is pro-life and anti-gay marriage (like most Republicans) and favors gun control and nationalized health care (like most Democrats)—and he considers himself an unusually consistent political liberal. He started out as a political conservative in the 1980s in Britain, but he switched his allegiance to the Liberal Democrats by 1997 initially because of political corruption but more substantially for philosophical reasons (pp. xxi–xxiv). He writes this book against what he calls the background of “my own disillusion with the Right and subsequent move” to the Left (p. xxv). Trueman’s target audience in this book is people who are both religiously and politically conservative. And in this case “target” isn’t a bad metaphor.

2.1. Tracing the Argument

Trueman explicitly states his thesis three times: “religious conservatism does not demand unconditional political conservatism” (p. xvii); “conservative Christianity does not require

² E.g., John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Wayne Grudem, ed., *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

conservative politics or conservative cultural agendas” (p. xix); and “Politics in democracy is a whole lot more complicated than either political parties or your pastor tell you it is; treat it as such—learn about the issues and think for yourself” (p. xxvi).

The six chapters of *Republicrat* “do not form a particularly sustained and sequential argument, but can be read in isolation, as snapshot reflections upon the connections between the Christian religion and politics as I see it in my own life in the USA context” (p. xxvi). Here is what each chapter argues:

1. The Old Left’s emphasis on ameliorating economic oppression was superseded by the New Left’s fusion of Marx and Freud that focuses on “psychological oppression.” As a result, “the Left has lost its way and is barely worthy of support these days” (p. 1). Trueman has “no political place to call home” because he is a pre-1950s liberal. Special-interest groups have hijacked the Left and eclipsed “the things I hold dear as important political issues—poverty, sanitation, housing, unemployment, hunger” (pp. 1–2). The Left is “supposed to provide a voice to the voiceless,” but abortion is one of their nonnegotiable pillars even though unborn children are “the most voiceless of all” (pp. 12–15; cf. 93).

2. Even though much of American politics is “explicitly religious” (p. 21), at heart it is just as secular as in Britain. The difference is that American politics expresses secularity with “religious idioms” (p. 23) in at least four ways: (1) many Christians assume that health, wealth, and happiness demonstrate that God is pleased with them; (2) their mindset about their “rights” carries over into the church, where church discipline is passé and people distrust authority and avoid commitment (pp. 28–32); (3) *The Patriot’s Bible* and LaHaye and Jenkins’s *Left Behind* series are examples of a heretical tendency to identify “America with God’s special people” (pp. 32–34); and (4) many Christians are obsessed with Christian celebrities.

3. Fox News is as evil and biased as the liberal media, and many Christians are foolishly oblivious to this. Arguments by Glenn Beck and Bill O’Reilly are logically fallacious drivel. Rupert Murdoch, the wicked, greedy owner of Fox News, has conspired to undermine the family by airing *The Simpsons* during the typical family dinner time at 6 p.m. “Christians should be eclectic in their approach” to news-listening and avoid “those whose stock-in-trade are clichés, slander, and lunatic conspiracy theories” (pp. 56, 59).

4. Capitalism is at this point in history the least evil option for wealth-creation, but others may replace and improve it in the future. Christians should be wary of capitalism for at least ten reasons (pp. 71–78).

5. “Democracy as it currently exists addresses very complicated questions, but does so through a system (the party framework) and a culture (televisual and aesthetic) that militate against addressing the issues with the seriousness and subtlety they require” (p. 98). All Christians should “feel pain when they mark the relevant box, knowing the trade-offs they are having to make as they do so, and how their action belies the complexity of reality” (p. 83).

6. Democratic governments do not change much from election to election, despite what candidates and parties promise. There is not “an obviously ‘Christian’ position” on issues like

the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, trade unions, rates of taxation, gun control, defense spending, financial regulation, and education (pp. 107–8; cf. 18).

The danger in taking strong political positions on these issues, and, even worse, partisan politics, is that the church will ultimately exclude those who do indeed believe the gospel and who should therefore be included. . . .

It is my belief that the identification of Christianity, in its practical essence, with very conservative politics will, if left unchallenged and unchecked, drive away a generation of people who are concerned for the poor, for the environment, for foreign-policy issues. (pp. 108–9)

2.2. Strengths

1. *Republicrat* shares the same strength of Trueman’s other writings: entertaining wit. He is never boring. Some sections of *Republicrat* arouse chortles:

I was rapidly disabused of my self-image as a moderate. On one of my very first Sundays in the USA, I was engaged in a conversation with a friend over coffee after church, and mentioned in passing what great work I thought the Clintons had done in Ulster. I might as well have said that Jack the Ripper had really helped to make the streets of London safe for women and children. I was given the full forty-minute “truth about Billary” lecture, and left the building in no doubt that the Clintons were, after Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot, probably the most dangerous and wicked leaders in the history of world politics. (p. xxiv)

Most of us have come across those evangelicals who, in reaction to the Religious Right, like to parade the fact they vote Democratic in a kind of schoolboyish “Aren’t I naughty?” kind of way. It’s often an empty gesture, a kind of theological vegetarianism; vegetarians do something that costs them nothing, but my, oh my, does it not make them feel morally superior to the rest of us. (p. 15)

I also have no problem with outrageous overstatement to make a point, no doubt being guilty of it myself on various occasions. (p. 43)

2. Trueman’s primary motivation for writing *Republicrat* is honorable: he believes “that the evangelical church in America is in danger of alienating a significant section of its people, particularly younger people, through too tight a connection between conservative party politics and Christian fidelity” (p. xx). Readers will have vastly different senses for the degree to which conservatives need Trueman’s challenges (based largely on their worldviews and life-experiences), but few would disagree that some religious conservatives tie conservative politics to their theology in unwise, embarrassing, and idolatrous ways.

3. Trueman’s outsider’s perspective adds some provocative insights about connections between religion and politics in America (e.g., chaps. 2 and 4).

We like Carl. He is on the side of the angels. We profit immensely from reading his essays at *Reformation 21*, the online magazine of the Alliance of Confessional Evangelicals, and

his editorials in *Themelios*. Nevertheless (you knew an adversative was coming), *Republocrat* has some weaknesses.

2.3. Weaknesses

Trueman admits, “I am simply delighted that I will disappoint so many different groups of people in such a comprehensive manner” (pp. xix–xx). We are two of those delight-producing, duly disappointed people.

1. Trueman does not practice what he preaches in this book: “As Christians . . . we need above all things to think carefully about politics, to engage the process and the issues in a way that respects their complexity, and to avoid clichés, oversimplifications, and Manichaeism that bedevil electoral campaigns” (pp. xx–xxi). Instead, he topples simplistic, self-constructed straw men. For example:

Now, if one happens to believe that the untrammelled free market, deregulation, massive defense budgets, and paltry domestic infrastructure spending are not the best ways to address this biblical imperative [to love our neighbors], where does one turn? Not to the Republican Party, for whom these matters have become virtual mantras. (p. 19)

He fails to engage serious political conservatives in any real sense. Instead of interacting with intellectually robust and respectable arguments that he might find in a periodical like *National Review*, his few conversation partners do not rise above the level of selectively dissecting quotes from media opinionators like Glenn Beck. To some degree this is due to *Republocrat* being a popular-level book.³ But Trueman’s approach rings hollow since his book is filled with snide, cynical, reductionistic arguments mocking political conservatism for that very quality of political discourse. Trueman repeatedly takes drive-by shots at political conservatism, superficially skimming issues in precisely the inadequate and slanted way he criticizes people like Rush Limbaugh of doing.⁴ For example, he never thoughtfully weighs the pros and cons of issues such as abortion, capitalism, gun control, taxation, health care, global warming, or energy resources and uses. Instead, he deftly dismisses conservative views, sometimes with only slightly more argumentation than a stand-up comedian. He argues, for instance, that conservatives

³ Trueman can write academic works with the best of them, but this is not one of those books. At no point does Trueman engage seriously with primary or secondary literature on politics.

⁴ Trueman responds to two recurring criticisms of *Republocrat* in early online reviews: “One is the claim that I seem unaware of serious conservative thought and operate solely between polarities determined by Fox News and MSNBC. The second is that, in hammering the Fox fans, I deal only with straw men.” *Republocrat*, he argues, “is a series of journalistic criticisms of the populist culture of the Religious Right” (“The Last Straw(man),” *Reformation21 Blog*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2010/10/the-last-strawman.php>), but his book never distinguishes between populist and intellectual conservatism. It superficially presents three modern options: (1) liberalism, (2) conservatism, and (3) Trueman’s *via media*. This is a common reductionistic way to present an argument: (1) there are twits on the right and (2) dingbats on the left, but (3) unlike those extremes, there’s my reasonable middle way.

inconsistently advocate both a limited government and strong military (pp. 89–90), but this is hardly inconsistent when one explores the reasons conservatives give for each.

2. Trueman gives more ink to capitalism and abortion than other issues, but these discussions lack sufficient nuance and fail to wrestle with the best conservative arguments. Trueman warns that capitalism, which he conflates with consumerism, greedily focuses on economic prosperity and reshapes ethics and values (pp. 71–78).⁵ He argues that the abortion-issue is unhelpfully divisive and that Christians who make it “a wedge issue” essentially kill “intelligent discussion on a host of other political topics” (p. xx). Further, he argues that electing Republicans instead of Democrats does not significantly affect abortion in America (pp. xx, 104–7, 109):

If the democratic legislative path to addressing the issue is proving unfruitful [a protasis that Trueman argues for on pp. 105–6 but that we reject], is there any point in allowing the matter to be the make-or-break issue on which individuals make their voting decisions at election time? Or is it simply a rhetorical game, played by cynical politicians on both sides of the debate to rally their supporters and demonize the opposition? Is the one who votes for the pro-choice Democratic candidate really any more or less culpable on the abortion issue than the one who votes pro-life Republican, knowing that the candidate’s rhetoric will in no way be matched by any legislative action? . . . Bottom line: abortion will be overturned in the USA only when a majority of people voting for both parties wish to see it happen. Using it as a wedge issue at election time to polarize opinion will not achieve that for which Christians all long: the reduction and ultimate elimination of legal abortions. (pp. 106–7)

This is simply misguided.⁶ So is Trueman’s broader, cynical argument that the differences between Democrats and Republicans are minimal (pp. 101–3).⁷

3. The chapter on Fox News is over the top.⁸ Granted, Rupert Murdoch is a shrewd, opportunistic businessman, and Fox Entertainment is not always wholesome—just like all the

⁵ Contrast Jay W. Richards, *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism Is the Solution and Not the Problem* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Arthur C. Brooks and Peter Wehner, *Wealth and Justice: The Morality of Democratic Capitalism* (Washington, D.C.: AEI, 2010); Wayne Grudem, *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 261–319.

⁶ See Grudem, *Politics*, 124–78, 574–76. Cf. Randy Alcorn, *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments* (2nd ed.; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000); Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case against Abortion Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Scott Klusendorf, *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009); Justin Taylor, “‘Abortion Is about God’: Piper’s Passionate, Prophetic Pro-Life Preaching,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 328–50; *ibid.*, “Abortion: Why Silence and Inaction Are Not Options for Evangelicals,” in *Don’t Call It a Comeback: The Same Faith for a New Day* (ed. Kevin DeYoung; Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 179–90.

⁷ Cf. Grudem, *Politics*, 572–90.

⁸ See evaluations 1–2 in Kevin DeYoung, “Republicrat: A Review,” *DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed*, October 19, 2010, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2010/10/19/republicrat-a-review/>.

other secular, mainstream entertainment. But for all the liberal outrage over Fox News, its news programming is no more biased than its competitors—only biased in the other direction. As for Beck and O’Reilly, they are not news anchors; they are provocative opinionators on opinion shows.

4. Trueman repeats the liberal talking points that conservative politics are not concerned for the poor, the environment, and foreign policy (e.g., p. 109). This is moral superiority on the cheap—policy prescriptions that differ from the Left do not equate to unconcern.

Conversely, in spite of the spectacular and brutalizing failures of twentieth-century collectivism, Trueman evinces a yearning for some new version of socialism that just might work in some hypothetical future. We are reminded of the old saw, “If only we had some jam, we could have jam and bread . . . if only we had some bread.”

5. There is a reason this book lacks a Scripture index: it doesn’t need one. It would include only a few references to books and/or chapters (pp. 33, 71–72, 74). This undermines Trueman’s thesis that conservative politics should not be tied to conservative theology because Trueman never engages arguments like the ones we read in Grudem’s *Politics* that see conservative theology *entailing* conservative politics.

2.4. Verdict

Republocrat is a polemic, and we expect Trueman had as much fun writing it as we did reading it. He brings to the work a gift for big-theme narrative, an entertaining wit, and a colorful British perspective. The book highlights legitimate weaknesses among political and theological conservatives, but it fails to acknowledge or deal seriously with the intellectual Christian Right.

3. *Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, City of Man*

The authors are evangelical political insiders. Both were part of President George W. Bush’s administration and now write political commentary. Michael Gerson was a senior editor covering politics at *U.S. News & World Report* before serving as Bush’s policy advisor and chief speechwriter, and his nationally syndicated column appears in the *Washington Post*. Peter Wehner served in the Reagan and George H. W. Bush Administrations prior to serving in the George W. Bush Administration as Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives; he writes for *Commentary*, *Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Gerson and Wehner’s positions are conservative, but their strategy and tone differ from the religious right of the past three decades. Tim Keller observes in the foreword, “Evangelicals who are Democrats will probably wish the authors struck some additional notes or made some points differently, but overall this is a wonderfully balanced and warm invitation to believers of every persuasion to re-engage in political life, more thoughtfully than before, but as passionately as ever” (p. 11).

3.1. Tracing the Argument

“Political theology—a shorthand description for how people of faith view politics—has profound public consequences” (p. 13). *City of Man* presents what political theology should look like for American evangelicals today at a transitional time when the religious right’s political theology is fading. The argument unfolds in six chapters and an epilogue:

1. Religion and politics are not necessarily enemies. “Some things are far more *important* than politics,” but that does not mean that politics are unimportant (p. 25). “Laws express moral beliefs and judgments” that shape society (p. 31). Five guiding precepts should shape how we think and act: (1) individual citizens and the state have different moral duties; (2) individual Christians and the church have different roles; (3) there is room for disagreement because the Bible “says almost nothing at all about what we would consider public policy” (p. 36); (4) the nature of a society partially determines how Christians flesh out their political theology; and (5) America is not the new Israel.

2. The religious right, which began to rise in the late 1970s, quickly transitioned evangelicals from political disengagement to defensive activism. Billy Graham was the priest, James Dobson the prophet, and Pat Robertson the Republican kingmaker. The religious right partly succeeded, but they largely failed for four reasons: (1) their language and tone was often angry, reactive, melodramatic, hysterical, “apocalyptic, off-putting, and counterproductive”; (2) their strategy was “inconsistent and politically arbitrary”; (3) theologically, they identified America as the new Israel; and (4) they lacked simple human sympathy in tragedies (pp. 58–61).

3. Religious and political conservatives are transitioning away from the religious right, whose leadership is passing and fading (e.g., D. James Kennedy, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Pat Robertson). Most evangelicals are still pro-life and against same-sex marriage, but they now have different views on the environment, human rights, and social justice. Those with the most influence are people like Rick Warren and Tim Keller because “their manner and style” is “non-abrasive, culturally sophisticated, theologically conservative, in search of common ground where possible” (p. 69). Republicans must “develop a more sophisticated approach to religion and public life” because evangelicals “are looking for something deeper and something better” (p. 72).

4. Regarding foreign policy, evangelicals should promote human rights because humans have equal, inalienable, culture-transcending, Creator-endowed rights.

5. Regarding domestic policy, four categories guide evangelical thinking: order (e.g., crime-enforcement), justice (e.g., defending defenseless unborn children from abortion), virtue (e.g., promoting the family, which does not happen through the AFDC welfare program, no-fault divorce, legalized same-sex marriage, or poor-quality schools), and prosperity (e.g., capitalism). “The main point” is that our public discourse is radically inadequate because it is oriented “towards individual rights” (p. 105).

6. The way we argue is as important as what we argue. The most persuasive arguments in the public square appeal not to divine revelation but to natural law—something that Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. did when arguing against slavery and segregation.

Evangelicals in the public square must be “reasonable, judicious, and sober” so that others view the cause as “amiable and peaceable” (p. 122). This entails regularly interacting with people you respect but who disagree with you.

7. Epilogue: Some evangelicals abandon politics in order to focus on forming the culture, arguing that “culture is upstream from politics.” But sometimes “politics is upstream from culture” (p. 131). Case in point: segregation. Politics is necessary, can improve lives, and can be noble.

3.2. Strengths

1. Gerson and Wehner understand the political landscape well and promote a biblically faithful, intellectually respectable, and pragmatically feasible political theology.

2. Gerson and Wehner’s arguments are evenhanded and not rash. They are the result of decades of sharpening throughout their political careers. Chapter 1, for example, is impeccably argued.

3. The religious and political experiences of Gerson and Wehner unusually equip them for a book like this. They are evangelical intellectuals who served in the White House during a tumultuous period, and they include some sober anecdotes about what crises looked like from the inside of the White House (e.g., pp. 33–35, 91, 123, 126).

3.3. Weaknesses

1. Gerson and Wehner define the “religious right” very narrowly, enabling them to criticize easy targets like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. They ignore the influence of respected intellectuals such as Michael Novak (*The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*) and William F. Buckley Jr. (founder of *National Review*). This is especially surprising since Wehner, as noted above, regularly contributes to *National Review* and several other respected organs of the Right.

2. They conclude, “The religious right, it turns out, was not good for religion.” Given their own acknowledgement of the movement’s accomplishments, this seems over-broad, but it rings most true in questions of tone (e.g., Falwell’s and Robertson’s outlandish and insensitive pontifications about God’s purpose in specific calamities). Importantly, as part of the emerging “Reagan coalition” of social, economic, and foreign policy conservatives, the religious right led Christians to reengage with politics and led many non-Christians in the coalition to give a careful hearing to the gospel. This is anecdotal, but the Lord drew both me (Charles) and my brother Larry to faith through the influence of political leaders (e.g., Buckley and Reagan) who spoke of their faith and preachers who were active in the politics of the day.⁹

⁹ See Larry Naselli’s thoughts after the deaths of Ronald Reagan in 2004 (<http://www.larrynaselli.com/blog/index.blog/334357/stronggod-used-him-to-change-my-lifelong/>) and William F. Buckley Jr. in 2008 (<http://www.larrynaselli.com/blog/index.blog/1792423/wfb-rip/>).

3. *City of Man* is well-argued as far as it goes, but it does not break much new ground. And the familiar ground it covers is not covered very deeply—even though that is exactly what they appeal for in political discourse.

4. Some arguments could be more careful. For example, after quoting Rom 13:1a, Gerson and Wehner parenthetically add, “The governing authority then was Nero, who persecuted Christians and then burned them at the stake.” But, Doug Moo explains, “Paul was writing Romans during the early years of Nero’s reign, a period of Roman stability and good government (quite in contrast to Nero’s later bizarre and anti-Christian behavior).”¹⁰

3.4. Verdict

Gerson and Wehner thoughtfully apply their seasoned political perspective to the current American evangelical scene. This is a book that political and religious conservatives need not be embarrassed about if people with different political and religious viewpoints read it; to the contrary, that would be constructive and healthy for all sides.

4. Conclusion

These books all encourage Christians to interact with politics in a way that brings glory to God as salt and light in the world. Each acknowledges that theology should drive political beliefs, not *vice versa*, and that the working out of those political beliefs will vary according to circumstances.

The books also differ in several ways:

1. Authors. The authors differ significantly in nationality, training, academic expertise, and life-experiences. Trueman is British, the others American. Trueman is an outsider, Gerson and Wehner insiders. Grudem is a systematic theology professor with a PhD from the University of Cambridge, and Trueman is a historical theology professor with a PhD from the University of Aberdeen; but Gerson and Wehner are public commentators and former public officials, not professional theologians.

2. Size. Grudem’s book is massive compared to the others. It is about 280,000 words compared to Trueman’s 30,000 words and Gerson and Wehner’s 37,000 words.

3. Scope. Grudem’s book is—as the subtitle says—“comprehensive.” Trueman focuses on discounting the religious right. Gerson and Wehner constructively point the way forward for religious and political conservatives in broad strokes.

4. Style. Grudem’s book is a textbook with a clear layout and argument. Trueman’s book is a loose collection of popular essays intended to provoke, critique, and entertain. Gerson and Wehner are workmanlike, admitting that they wrote “this book in a very short period of time” (p. 140).

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 807.

5. Audience. We would recommend Grudem’s book to just about anyone, especially those who would like a theologically informed, up-to-date, and easy-to-understand yet robust survey of politics. We would recommend Trueman’s book to religious and political conservatives whose political media diet consists primarily of popular pundits like Glenn Beck and Bill O’Reilly. We would recommend Gerson and Wehner’s book especially for political conservatives who are considering moving left and for political liberals and moderates who may be skeptical that religious and political conservatives can be reasonable and intellectual.

“The next phase of Christian social engagement,” Gerson and Wehner assert, “will need to move beyond reaction, instead applying first principles to a broad range of public concerns” (pp. 61–62). We agree. And Grudem’s book is a good place to start.¹¹

¹¹ Special thanks to several friends for examining this essay and sharing helpful feedback, especially Brian Collins, David Crabb, Andrew Franseen, Jim Hamilton, Collin Hansen, Shayne McAllister, Larry Naselli, Justin Taylor, Mark Ward, and Taylor West.