



City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era

Michael J. Gerson, Peter Wehner, Timothy J. Keller (Foreword)

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From two former White House insiders, one a columnist for the *Washington Post*, the other for the *New York Times*

Our nation is in a political nightmare. With the rise of the Alt-Right, and increasing division between liberals and conservatives, it is hard to know how to be politically engaged while maintaining Christian integrity.

Former White House insiders Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner call evangelicals toward a new kind of political engagement—a kind that is better both for the church and the country, a kind that cannot be co-opted by either political party, a kind that avoids the historic mistakes of both the Religious Right and the Religious Left.

A product of the authors' own wrestling with the complicated relationship between religion and politics, *City of Man* deals with questions central to evangelicals' future political role, including:

How can religious people exercise influence while maintaining their integrity?

What tone should they be known for?

How should they think about the role and purpose of government?

Which causes and issues, both at home and abroad, ought to be a part of their agenda?

Incisive, bold, and marked equally by pragmatism and idealism, Gerson and Wehner's book charts a new political future not just for civic-minded Christians and "values voters," but for the nation as a whole.

City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era Details

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From Reader Review City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era for online ebook

Chris Griffith says

Interesting and brief introduction to religion and politics. Strong points: writers encourage Christians to not be separatists but rather be engaged in what's happening in the political realm. Weakness: Very little mention of the Lordship of Christ and the need to disciple the nations. These two former George W. Bush speech writers appear to be no fans of any type of Christendom.

Justin says

"Political engagement is not a luxury. The fighting of raging fires requires not contemplation but a fire extinguisher" (135). But how does the Christian respond in an aggravated political environment? Reading this book was timely this election year. I appreciate the authors' suggestions on appropriate tone in political discourse, the significance for human dignity in our borders and outside of them, and our responsibility as Christians and citizens in the Land of the Free to pursue order and justice where we now reside in the City of Man because, ultimately, we are building the City of God, our eternal home.

"If one lives in a neighborhood plagued by poverty, dominated by gangs, and severed by failing schools... If one lives in a foreign country without medicines for [disease], or ruled by a cruel dictator, the current policy priorities of the American people and its government matter greatly" (134-135).

Elizabeth says

A must read for all incumbent and aspiring public servants with Christian faith. It's not a theological book but rather a series of research study perusing the concept of religion and politics. A great book that takes you from history of Christianity movement in the context of our government to how Christians should serve in public service. It doesn't provide you with perfect answers but definitely provides insightful pointers. Read only to have your eyes renewed from distrust of and hopelessness of democracy, capitalism, and the power of government.

Justin Tapp says

Since I've been working through various presentations of Christian interaction with society, particularly in the economic sphere, I thought it useful to read some modern takes on Christian involvement in politics. I thought Gerson/Wehner would be a good contrast with Jim Wallis. Gerson is a former speech writer in the G.W. Bush White House and current Washington Post pundit (and occasional NewsHour fill-in for David Brooks) and Wehner was also involved in policy strategy for Bush. Both are professing evangelicals.

As Tim Keller writes in the foreword:

"(A)ny simplistic Christian response to politics—the claim that we shouldn't be involved in politics, or that we should “take back our country for Jesus”—is inadequate. In each society, time, and place, the form of political involvement has to be worked out differently, with the utmost faithfulness to the Scripture, but also the greatest sensitivity to culture, time, and place."

The authors quickly gloss over a few historical strains of Christian views on politics, comparing the extremes of isolationism and efforts to create theocracy. There is a lot of room between poles on the continuum for a Christians to be.

Engaging in politics as a career can, in the strain of A.W. Tozer, be just as holy an act as sewing a tent, preparing an accounting audit, writing a sermon, or bagging groceries. So long as Christians do the work with a view to glorify God, it is holy, and none of the above are more holy than the other.

The authors look at a proper role of the state that (they hope) all Christians can agree upon while also looking at the proper role of the church within the state. They offer five precepts:

1. Moral duties of individuals and the state are different. Don't confuse Matthew 5 with Romans 13.
2. The Church as a body has different roles and obligations than individual Christians.
3. Scripture doesn't provide a blueprint for government and public policy.

(Emphasis mine):

"(T)he role of the church, at least as we interpret it, is to provide individual Christians with a moral framework through which they can work out their duties as citizens and engage the world in a thoughtful way, even as it resists the temptation to instruct them on how to do their job or on which specific public policies they ought to embrace."

Hence, the church should stand for liberty, justice, and human rights but not endorse specific bills on the floor. As C.S. Lewis believed, it's the role of the layperson and not the clergy to help the Church understand and work through certain issues of expertise. "This is where we want the Christian economist," as Lewis gave as one example that I have posted on my office door.

In stronger language:

"Identification of Christian social ethics with specific partisan proposals that clearly are not the only ones that may be characterized as Christian and as morally acceptable comes close to the original New Testament meaning of heresy."

What is "clearly Christian" is debatable, but I would argue that a pastor endorsing specific budget bills that contain a complex array of complicated items is problematic (more on this tomorrow).

I sent this quote to my congressman:

Yet to govern is to choose—and those in public life have a duty to develop, as best they can, a sound political philosophy, to engage in rigorous moral reasoning, and to make sure they do not become so captive

to ideology that they ignore empirical evidence.

4. Political involvement of Christians depends on the context they live in. New Testament Christians accepted their non-democratic governments as given, and submitted to authorities. Through democracy, we have the ability to peacefully pursue changes in our society that they didn't have, and perhaps this obligates us to different action.

5. God doesn't deal with nations as He did with Israel. (America is not Israel. But step into your average Southern Baptist church on a 4th of July service or "God and Country Day," and you might get confused about that).

Gerson and Wehner summarize the emergence of the evangelical Christian Right and the decline of the mainline denominations, for better or worse. They are clearly not fans of Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson.

They then shift to what they see as the proper role of government:

"There are, we believe, four categories—order, justice, virtue, and prosperity—that can help Christians think through the proper role of government in our lives...A wise government, constructed around a true view of human nature, thus creates the conditions necessary to allow the great mass of the people to live well and to flourish, to enjoy both order and liberty, to live under the protection of the state without being suffocated by it...We count ourselves conservatives in the tradition of Edmund Burke, who averred that God instituted government as a means of human improvement."

Basically, the classical liberal view of man's dignity but supported by a belief in man being created in God's image and undergirded by the ultimate belief in an ultimate source of Truth to provide a basis for our laws. Gerson and Wehner agree that democratic capitalism is the system that best allows man to be free and have the best opportunity to fulfill his God-given potential and creativity. "Judging by its fruit," democratic capitalism has never produced a famine and has provided the highest standard of living in terms of material wealth, liberty, and religious freedom, therefore it makes sense for Christians to promote it as a good way to order society.

The authors conclude the book with a look at rhetoric, how important it is for members of a society to have the freedom to be persuaded:

"(B)ecause human beings are created in God's image, they are morally autonomous and free to choose. They are capable of reason, and of being reasoned with. What most separates human beings from animals is a moral conscience, the ability to engage in private and public conversations about the human condition."

They conclude with some advice for Christian "persuaders" from the viewpoint of people who were responsible for crafting Bush speeches and op-eds.

There are some real weaknesses in the book, so I give it 3 stars out of 5. It's brief, so they don't contain well-defended arguments of either political or moral philosophy. The sources they draw from are also fairly few. I'm reminded that Christians have been dealing with this for thousands of years, so it'd be better to read something written 1,000 years ago than something written last year. They also ascribe certain economic outcomes to policy they see guided by Christian ethical principles, which I find problematic as economists disagree with them based on the data. Examples: Was it welfare reform that reduced poverty or the 1990s technology boom? Was it Rudy Giuliani's policies that caused crime to decrease in New York, or did he

simply benefit from a nation-wide phenomenon of widely debated causes? Economists doubt the effects of policy in these examples, but Gerson and Wehner seem unaware of that. Obviously, the Bush Administration pushing through billions for AIDS-related medicine to Africa had some great outcomes we would not have seen otherwise but other examples they give are not that clean-cut.

Major issues like taxing and redistribution are completely bypassed in this book. They recognize that Christians will debate these issues and that Scripture doesn't give us clear-cut prescriptions.

My biggest disappointment would be that it didn't deal much with the various historical approaches. I look at Christian interaction with society from what I understand to be the Anabaptist perspective (as James Halteman describes it, which differs from how Gerson and Wehner describe it): Our ultimate allegiance as Christians is to God, and not to a country. That doesn't mean that we live as isolationists, but rather that we organize ourselves primarily as a church community that serves as a model for the world and invites others to join. We don't try to force others to adopt our ways and we recognize that we cannot legislate morality, but we argue that God's order is the best order for man to fulfill his God-given potential.

The Christians and Jews of Scripture were living in occupied territories. They understood the Roman Empire both from repeated history and prophecy to be temporary, but the Church would endure forever. So, I think issues of patriotism and nationalism were very familiar to them (particularly Jews) but seen as secondary to the importance of the Church-- among which there is no distinction between race or nationality-- "neither Jew nor Greek," as Paul said. As politics inherently involves or results in issues of patriotism and nationalism, it's something that Christians need to be wary about, and something that Gerson and Wehner spend little time discussing.

If the Church isn't our first and primary concern and focus, then we end up engaging in Jim Wallis-like efforts to try and make the government and the entire population do what the church should be doing. We divert Church resources to lobbying Congress instead of working to achieve the same ends they want congressional legislation to do. And we engage in endless useless debate about whether initiatives like welfare reform are biblical or contrary. That's my problem with Gerson and Wehner's ambiguity.

Jeremy says

A gracious call to Christians to recognize their call to citizenship that seeks common good, exercises gracious persuasion, and respects the proper bounds of the noble calling of political involvement as work firmly situated in our present residence in the City of Man, with the hopeful anticipation of the coming City of God as our final home.

Ben Adkison says

I received this book from my brother for Christmas and was initially very intrigued because Tim Keller, a man whom I greatly respect, wrote the forward. Gerson and Wehner (the authors of the book) are not theologians, rather they are right-leaning politicians who happen to be Christians and care deeply about both faith and politics. The good thing about this book is that it's not the same-ole', same ole' story from two Christians who have wholesale bought an unchallenged, stale Republican vision for how to make this country "God's nation." Gerson and Wehner lay a foundation for how Christians should understand both the

role of their faith and the role of the government within a democratic society. My one caveat is that they fail to fully address many issues, and despite their intentions to move beyond the mistakes of the Religious Right, at times they still seem a bit short-sighted.

Verdict: A good introduction to the discussion of faith and politics, but a little too brief.

Three of Five Cups of Black Coffee.

Catherine Gillespie says

My husband works in politics so I probably hear more about it than most people, and yet over the past several years I've found myself growing more and more disillusioned with the escalating rhetoric and degenerating tone in our political arena. This is not to say that good people are absent from politics; there are plenty of principled people on both sides of the aisle (including but not limited to my husband!), but in large part I feel like there is a lack of civility, a reluctance to work with other viewpoints, and a scary proliferation of illogical arguments and ad hominem attacks. It's done by both parties at all levels and it turns me off.

That's why I found *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era* such a refreshing and inspiring book. The authors note that "the younger generation feels alienated by leading figures on both the right and the left. Along with so many of their elders, they are looking for something deeper and something better." In a well written but brief 136 page book, the authors explore how religion and politics intersect, the historical context for different perspectives on particularly Christian involvement in American politics over time, and how we might navigate to a political philosophy that is in line with religious beliefs while not being used by either political party.

Both Gerson and Wehner are Christians, and so the book tracks primarily Judeo-Christian perspectives, although I think the arguments would be thought-provoking and illuminating to someone seeking to understand the American political scene in general. I thought it was interesting how the authors explain the rise of the religious left and the religious right, and how many Christians are increasingly disillusioned with both groups. Their research showed that these Christians "sense that both the religious right and the religious left may be treading the same path – baptizing someone else's policy preferences and calling the result Christian."

After surveying the data, the book turns to questions of the role of religion in the public square: when should churches speak out, the role of the individual in relation to the government, how faith can impact policy in a pluralistic nation, and so forth. Although the authors are not very specific in their conclusions, I think that's good because it leaves the reader space to think over the issues for himself and consider what the political landscape would look like if people were more civil (see *Colossians 4:6*) and principled.

Overall I think *City of Man* is good food for thought, and I would recommend it if you are interested in politics.

{Read more of my reviews at [A Spirited Mind.](#)}

Donal Elliott says

I am challenged by the two authors who are committed Christians and able to reflect thoughtfully and critically on how Christians should think about the role and purpose of government. While they acknowledge their own "conservative" slant, they see that ideological bias can blind Christians (left or right) from a biblical approach to policy and how politics is practiced. They recognize that while there is a proper place and responsibility for government to address justice in the public square, it also faces limits and is not the only social institution that should be actively working for common goals.

David says

A very muddled explanation of the relation between faith and culture/politics, which is disappointing but unsurprising considering how much confusion there is among Christians today on how their faith relates to the pluralistic public square. It also didn't help that virtually all of the examples were partisan (guess which side). A much better treatment of this subject can be found in Tim Keller's book Center Church (Part 5: Cultural Engagement).

Jordan J. Andlovec says

A helpful primer to Christian political engagement post-Moral Majority era outrage. It was fairly well-rounded, and although they are both tried and true conservatives, the authors are wise enough to know they don't have all the answers.

Scott says

A nice treatment of evangelical politics in America.

Dennis Henn says

The authors, both conservative Christians, worked on staff for George W. They discuss the limits, the dangers and the hope of Christians in politics affecting social change. They attempt to be non-partisan as they consider the faith inspired actions of Lincoln, Wilson, Carter, and ML King Jr.

One of my favorite lines gave voice to why many young Christians are distrustful of politics. "They sense that both the religious right and the religious left may be treading the same path--baptizing someone else's policy preferences and calling the result Christian." I have protested and clamored that the church's voice has been coopted by the Republican Party. Rather than call the Party to task for their sins, Christians absolve them of guilt because they are the party of God. Such subjugation has allowed the ascendency of Donald Trump.

Tim Hoiland says

I finished reading *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era* a couple of weeks ago, and I've been sitting on it, mulling it over, ever since. It's an important book, warranting a great deal of careful thought, and it's also one of those rare books on US politics that actually does more to promote civil discourse in the public square than to erode it.

The central question of the book is one both urgent and timeless: "What does it mean to be a Christian citizen in history's most influential nation; in a world marked by growing interconnection, danger, and need; in a time of bitter domestic polarization and economic stress?"

The first part of the answer is that there are more than two political options, odd as that may seem to us in twenty-first century America...

- See more at: <http://tjhoiland.com/wordpress/2011/0...>

Andrew Tucker says

Read this book for my internship this summer. It serves its purpose as a primer, I would say its main weakness is lack of clarification. Namely, a brief critique of utilitarianism appears in the book, shortly followed by the presentation of an ideology that seems utilitarian because the clarification following is subtle. Not a huge problem but something that stayed in the back of my head while I read.

Ultimately, its an easy read worth engaging for an introduction.

Garrett says

This makes for fascinating reading, although not for the reasons that the authors originally intended. Before 8 November 2016, it was possible to write a book like this and have it be taken seriously as a prescription for Christians should engage with the world of politics: one that argued (among other things) that it was important for conservatives to be civil, to engage in politics carefully and that a better way of engaging with politics was possible. The authors seem to operate within the (at the time, not unreasonable) assumption that what they wanted was what the preponderance of conservatives wanted.

Then 81% of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. The oft-repeated observation here is that Trump was able to tap into a socially conservative but fiscally liberal combination of voters that the GOP didn't even realize was there, but Trump's flexibility in matters of policy strongly suggest that his voters were motivated more by anger than ideology. The authors here make the entirely reasonable mistake in assuming that voters that were angry at the Obama administration were actually interested in conservative governance, and weren't motivated only by anger. It's now possible to make a good case that this assumption was not true.

That doesn't mean that the vision that Gerson and Wehner sketch out here isn't a good one; it is. But it's been rejected by the majority of GOP voters. Perhaps evangelicals will be more receptive to it after Trump leaves the political scene.

