American Christian / Christian American:
A Conversation

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What follows is a five-part conversation about Christianity in the United States.

I
Introduction

ECM: Ever since I was a teenager, dividing my time between school, church, youth group, Bible study, and short-term missions, I have been influenced by a pretty simple critique of American Christianity and I wanted to run it by you since this is your area of expertise. The critique is not original to me and may well be wrong and the wronger it turns out to be the more quickly I will distance myself from it. But to me it seems at least *intuitively* correct and it has placed itself between me and the Christian communities most known and near to me.

So what I'd like to do here is present the critique briefly and then later apply it to a current issue or issues. If this proves interesting, maybe we can talk about a variety of these. Here's a thesis:

Much of American Christianity is more American than Christian. It takes American values and sanctifies them, reading them back into Scripture retroactively. The result is a national faith dissimilar, in many ways, to the original.

And here are some questions:

What constitutes a Christian community? What constitutes a Christian life? What constitutes a Christian citizen in the United States?

I am sympathetic to those who claim that Christian life should be radical, and that what passes for American Christian life is not nearly radical enough. I think I would be much more inclined to believe Christian tenets and enact a Christian life if I saw more compelling examples around me. We can talk specifics later, but maybe we should start here. What is your initial reaction?

BAS: First off, let me acknowledge agreement with your critique of American Christianity. Far too many individuals—and sadly far too many churches—view themselves first as Americans and second as Christians. And I've seen this firsthand: at a previous ministry I saw vehement opposition when I removed an American flag from the worship center, as if I had committed an unpardonable sin.

At its core, a Christian community is a group of believers unified by their love for and acceptance from Jesus. Bridging cultural, racial, and socioeconomic divides, the local Christian community is one that can be very diverse in all areas, but brought together by a common belief that Jesus Christ has changed and still is changing their lives. But when a Christian community fails to be diverse—either because it becomes closed to outsiders or coalesces around a shared culture—it leads to a situation where that culture is to be cherished, protected, and even exalted.

I think that's what we've seen in some Christian circles in America. These groups have unified around a narrative that argues for America being a holy & chosen nation, and that patriotism ought to be held at the same level as religious devotion.

Fed by unhealthy teachings—like the oft-misquoted, misapplied 2 Chronicles 7:14—and supported by an echo chamber of similar-thinking authors, pastors, and peers, this view has grown to the point where patriotism and devotion to Jesus are interchangeable—or, worse, the exact same thing.

The good news is that this only refers to a subset of the Christian community in America. There are many Christians and churches that have a healthier view of what it means to be an American Christian. They respect and love people from other religions and cultures, they vote for the best candidates instead of who holds the same doctrines that they do, and they seek to bring peace, hope, and beauty into the world. For these Christians, America is their home, a great place to live, and their country, but it is not the last great hope for the world. To them, that role belongs to Jesus.

ECM: I like that very much, and I'm curious to hear more about A) why you cite that verse specifically as so often misquoted, misapplied, and important, and B) why you chose to de-flag your worship center!

But I also want to remain focused on definitions, because I think that is where my biggest hang-ups are hung. Specifically, I am thinking about the relationship between what an American Christian *is* and what an American Christian *does*—the relationship between faith and works.

First, on *faith:* You define Christian community according to shared belief in the divinity of Christ, which sounds about right to me. But I think this definition suffers from an imprecision in terms—that is, I think *belief* and *faith* refer to similar but separate concepts.

Though Christianity leans very heavily on belief—and on *believers*—I find it difficult to invest much in belief-as-virtue. It seems to me that people believe things that they find persuasive and disbelieve things that fail to persuade and that there is nothing intrinsically moral in either course. I believe that the earth is round and that it is part of a larger solar system, but I don't consider that belief virtuous. Conversely, I disbelieve in Santa Claus, but I don't expect anyone to pat me on the back for this.

So while the question of believing or disbelieving in Christ is important, I am not very comfortable with the doctrine that belief makes or breaks the Christian.

Someone made the comment to me once that Christianity is the quintessentially American religion because it promises you everything without requiring much of anything. At its glibbest, the formulation goes something like this: *Hold a belief, say a prayer, receive an eternity of bliss.* It's the theological equivalent to wealth without work, weight loss without exercise.

To me *faith* implies something more than this—something both more committed and conscious—that blends belief with active agency.

Which brings us, second, to *works*: My concern about the pronounced *American-ness* of American Christianity actually has more to do with lifestyle than with patriotism, though the two are undeniably birds of a feather. As an idea, America is committed to values like freedom and rights and prosperity that strike me as largely irrelevant to or incompatible with radical Christianity as it is modeled in the gospels and the book of *Acts*. I think much of our current religious-political discourse testifies to a shift toward national values and away from the sacred.

As a caveat, I say this with the understanding that many churches and organizations regularly perform many charitable works, and are to be commended for doing so. But I'll maintain that there is a strong current of American Christianity devoted to insulating a comfortable, middle class, white, suburban lifestyle—albeit with church on Sundays—that, frankly, bores. At its worst, it constitutes several varieties of idolatry.

BAS: I agree with your statement that belief and faith (I would include doctrine) are similar but separate concepts. But holding to the right belief, doctrine, or saying you have faith does not make you a Christian. While these form a core part of what makes a Christian, it is an incomplete picture.

Your discomfort with belief-as-virtue may be due to the Evangelical shorthand surrounding the term belief. The word is incredibly imprecise, used to define who's in and who's out (believer vs. non-believer), a catchall prescription for any problem in your life (just believe), and the assurance of your salvation (belief in Jesus Christ). At its core, Christianity places a great importance on belief, but only as a means to an end, which is a life that's shaped by those beliefs.

Some of the beliefs in Christianity are concrete, based in historical truth: Jesus lived, died, and his followers spread his story throughout the known world. Other beliefs are less tangible: God created me, he loves me, and he has saved me from my sins. This is where I think the term *faith* is more appropriate: a Christian places his or her faith in Jesus Christ, hoping that he is who he said he is and will do what he said he would do.

The importance of belief and faith is in unifying Christians behind the same story. Throughout much of church history, the Apostles and Nicene Creeds were the unifiers. People in the local church would gather together and together recite their beliefs. But vocalizing these beliefs did not make you a Christian; instead, belief and faith serve to affect and shape one's life, reflecting more and more the heart and commands of Jesus. In this case, belief is not a virtue, but one's belief and faith directs a person to live a more virtuous life.

Unfortunately, most American evangelical churches no longer recite the creeds, nor do they universally agree on the works of a Christian. So for every church that is committed to caring for the poor, sheltering the needy, and creating dialogue with other faith

communities, there is a church that promotes a middle-class lifestyle, votes against welfare programs, and only has venomous, hate-filled words for followers of Islam.

I don't know if I have an answer to why these American Christians are this way, but I have wondered if it's because Protestant Christianity has been the de-facto public religion for most of America's history. The Declaration of Independence refers to the Creator and Divine Providence, while most presidents and public leaders have adapted (or co-opted) Christian language to promote American principles. This significantly diluted form of Christianity melded with the American values of independence, prosperity, and self-governance, to the point where it is hard for many now to separate the two.

When we removed the American flag from the worship center, it started as an innocuous decision: we were doing some reconfigurations in the space, and the flag didn't really have a great spot to go. But by removing the flag from where we worshipped, placing it elsewhere in the church, we struck a nerve with many people who felt that seeing the American flag was an essential part of the worship experience. To me, your charge of idolatry is the most appropriate wording for this part of American Christianity.

ECM: That's helpful, and I'm interested in your assessment of belief as the means to virtuous living, rather than as the key that opens the door to eternity. I think that claim might be controversial with some, but certainly not with me.

I'd like to offer one more very unrefined set of reflections on Christian belief-in-action and, in responding, maybe you can elaborate a bit on that formulation.

Those of us born and raised in Christian families could have testified from very early on that the road to life is narrow and the gate small, and that therefore only a select (*elect?*) group of people will ever qualify for entry.

Most Christians think of themselves as part of this group by virtue of their Christianity and that their great commission in life is to bring others in, despite the agreed upon reality that the group will always remain impressively small. Heaven is granted to people according to their right *belief*, and most of the world's peoples do not believe the right thing to gain access to heaven.

At present, the global population of Christians is estimated at just over two billion, leaving around five billion others bound for hell. This is troubling.

Still, if nearly a third of the people in the world *will* go to heaven, we might say that the road is narrow, but not *that* narrow.

In fact I am certain that, if we tried, we could find a diversity of Christian thinkers and writers and leaders who would revise that figure down substantially. By some of these estimates, Catholics may be excluded. By others, Protestants. The splintered array of denominations and sects and branches fracturing even the *conservative Protestant* varieties of Christian faith indicates that most Christians believe the true road to be very damn

narrow indeed and that it will refuse to accommodate a large number—perhaps a large *majority*—of even those people who consider themselves Christian. This, too, is troubling.

So, in sum, I think we can say that Christians tend to agree on the *narrowness* of the way, but to disagree on just *how narrow* it actually is, as well as on who, exactly, will fit upon it.

At this point, since I have a bleeding heart, you may expect that I am going to call for a larger and more inclusive Christianity. But not so! Those who hold these various beliefs about Christian-ness attribute them to divine injunctions not subject to revision by human beings, and I am prepared to grant them that.

Instead, as a sort of thought experiment, I want to suggest that the way to *Christian life*—to inclusion in a truly Christian community—is narrower than any denomination seems to believe, and much narrower than the way to *American life.* In this reading of the gospels, Jesus makes sweeping demands on his followers, demands of poverty and of service, demands that constitute nothing less than a radical separation from the conventions of mainstream life and that, were they observed today, would exclude an overwhelming majority of American Christians.

I think most Christians are comfortable with the prospect of mass damnation because it squares with their understanding of divine justice and because, importantly, *they expect to be safe.* But what if they're not? What if their particular theologies and lifestyle choices are incongruent with the gospel message? What if the way is too narrow even for *us,* whoever *we* are? Does that change how we think about the Christian life?

BAS: The thoughts of heaven and hell, glory and damnation, being brought in or left behind —nothing brings more passion and misunderstanding to a religious discussion. Without diving too far down into this theological abyss, we can safely state that a core tenant of Christianity is that one day God will bring his people to be with him; some call this heaven, while I prefer New Creation. For many Christians, they feel like they have it all figured out—including who's going where!—even if their version is more influenced by culture and literature than Scripture.

While I cannot claim to speak for God himself and suggest I know who will be a part of New Creation, I can reasonably argue that there will be no quiz you need to pass to gain acceptance. I do think those that are part of New Creation will share similar beliefs—like a devotion to God—but this is more due to the fact that they identify themselves as Christ's, or more importantly, that Christ identifies them as his own.

A common fundamentalist tactic is to create a long list of non-negotiable beliefs you must hold to gain acceptance into heaven. For those who do so, the gate to heaven is very narrow, and seems only to allow those that hold beliefs that are remarkably similar to one's own views. These tendencies have seemed to creep into evangelicalism as well, creating an unhelpful us vs. them language that misses the mark on Christ's command to love your neighbor. This insider/outsider language largely contributes to the belief that as long as I'm part of the Christian community/evangelical culture, I've got my ticket to heaven. But, as

you wisely noted in your comments, this reliance on the rightness of the culture makes a big and daring assumption: that my culture is the right one.

The Christian journey is to be, in its nature, counter-cultural. Throughout the teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, we see him push back against the popular teachings and beliefs. His harshest criticisms were against the man-made religious practices championed by the Pharisees. And as the followers of Christ spread through the Roman Empire, their criticism turned toward the Caesar-as-lord and pagan practices common in Europe and Asia. For the first 300 plus years of church history, Christianity was more of an underground, subversive movement in the Roman Empire, and it thrived in this role.

In times and places where Christianity has been outlawed, or at least not widely accepted in the common culture, the church has seen great growth and a deep commitment by its members. But when Christianity is the officially sanctioned religion, or is an integral part of culture, it loses its ability to speak against the ways of man and point them to Jesus and his path.

Christ never called his followers to live a life of comfort. Instead, he guaranteed his disciples a miserable life that would end prematurely. And yet comfort is exactly what too many churches and American Christians are seeking. Establishing Christian enclaves, they can work, worship, and raise their kids in a safe, protected environment where most everyone else agrees with them.

Perhaps the path of Christianity in the 21st Century American context will reflect the socio-political realities of Jerusalem in the days of Jesus: with a popular religious group relying too much on their political connections to hold on to power, and a subversive movement of followers loyal to Christ and reflecting his acts of community, love, and self-sacrifice.

ECM: I think that is the heart of the complaint—American Christianity is, to quote Francis Schaeffer, *bourgeois.* If the Christian tradition is replete with stories of service and sacrifice, this contemporary variety is powered by suburbanites and satellite campuses. It has played the odds, so to speak, investing in both earthly comfort and heavenly security. It serves both God and Mammon. It has cake, and eats it.

One of the most notable effects of this double-agency is that American values have subsumed Christian values, often to perplexing effect. The prominence of "religious freedom" arguments in our politics makes this clear. The term itself pairs the sacred with the political, but with the political as the noun, the centerpiece. Christianity has become so comfortably middle class that Christians must seek out persecution in the most far-flung regions, finding it in the laws regulating wedding boutiques and flower shops, or in the minutiae of health insurance statutes. The Roman Coliseum, these are not.

Which is not at all to suggest that persecution is a good thing or that minor violations are to be ignored until they become sufficiently large. It is simply to observe that *tradition* and *conservatism* are different animals—especially in their contemporary iterations.

I should note, too, that the incompatibilities between Americanism and Christianity do not suggest—to me—that the values of either are *bad* values. I happen to think that both religious commitment and freedom are social goods. A nation that provides its citizens—or at least, certain classes of citizens—with safety and material comfort may be said to be politically successful. But that success poses certain risks for the devout. As Susan Sontag once wrote, "Wherever people feel safe, they will be indifferent."

Questions of eternity entirely aside, I'm persuaded that Christianity is marked by *faith manifested in work,* in humility and service to the poor, and that Christian authenticity follows those who humbly serve. This lifestyle is not sexy, and pursuing it will get you nowhere near the "American Dream." But then, that's the point.

BAS: Christian beliefs and American values are not opposites, and in many cases are complementary. Where the two come into conflict, from my perspective, is in the stated goal for each. The "American Dream" is all about status, so someone can rise above their current life situation by sheer determination and hard work. The path of a follower of Christ is one of self-denial, humility, and unmerited grace.

The hybrid of the two that has formed in parts of fundamental and evangelical Christianity — seeking comfort and status while wrapped in the language and practice of the church — does a poor job of portraying either side. And when push comes to shove, it seems as though people will choose the former rather than the latter, pledging allegiance to Mammon instead of God. For them, they are proud American Christians, and in that order. Fortunately, there are plenty of Christians that follow the path of Christ by loving their neighbor, seeking peace and wholeness for all. These Christians might not be as vocal, nor get as much public attention, but they are having a tangible, lasting impact within their communities.

II
Christianity, America, and *Wealth*

ECM: Each semester, I like to begin certain of my classes with a reading of Peter Singer's 1972 article, "[Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#)." Not only is it an excellent example of provocative argument thoughtfully made, but it pushes students to think seriously about life and death and shared humanity, and about the ethical obligations of first-world citizenship.

Each semester, without fail, they *hate* it.

Essentially, Singer argues that people who live in wealthy Western nations like England, France, Australia, and the United States have an ethical obligation to donate large portions of their income to alleviate the suffering of people who live in famine-stricken parts of the world. Because these wealthy nations have the means to save people's lives, and because reputable organizations stand ready to make the arrangements, there is simply no justifiable excuse for inaction.

If we can save impoverished people, he argues, *without thereby impoverishing ourselves, then we should.*

In a 1999 [essay](#) for the *New York Times,* Singer puts this claim into some perspective, arguing that, because a family of four can maintain a decent quality of life on $30,000 a year, that family is ethically obligated to give everything in excess of $30,000 to famine relief in places like sub-Saharan Africa.

If you make $35,000 a year, then, you should donate $5,000. If you make $1,000,000, you should donate $970,000. Otherwise, you live an unethical life.

Students recoil from this essay because it makes such a strong demand on their income several years before they even have any. What they do have are bills and loans and the earnest desire to land a high-paying job and own a home and a car and support a family and achieve their personal goals. This is America, after all, where hard work and dedication pay off and reward you with the life of your dreams. And this guy *wants to make you feel bad about it!*

Singer angers us because he challenges a right to which we feel entitled—the right to *prosper,* to build wealth and use it as we see fit. With that challenge, he envisions a new way of life entirely recalibrated from an inward focus—on self-fulfillment—to an outward focus—on alleviating the pain of others.

Singer is not a Christian, and yet his radical claim that helping the needy is the *single most important responsibility in human life* reminds me very much of Christ. Americans who read this essay very often despise it, given how sharply it indicts the values of the American Dream. To me, this antipathy makes the argument seem more Christ-like rather than less.

When we talked last, we mostly agreed that American Christianity suffers from a sort of split personality, espousing American values that conflict with Christian values. Based on that discussion, it should be clear that neither of us endorses material prosperity as a *Christian* value, despite its undeniable centrality to the *American* system. But questions remain. In your view, can Christians be both obedient and wealthy? And is it possible to acquire wealth without also acquiring greed?

BAS: When I was a pastor, anytime I spoke on money I could see the people squirming in their seats. More than most other sermon topics, preaching on finances really made people uncomfortable, not unlike your students each semester. Perhaps the displeasure on this topic is due to the personal nature of the subject—after all, it is *my* money.

This discussion exposes the self-centeredness of Americans when it comes to possessions and money—they are ours to possess. And Christians and churches are no exception to this. We can fall into the trap of thinking bigger is better and we must have more. This mindset is wrong, and it uncovers the sins of self-centeredness, finding our identity in what we own rather than who owns us, and placing our trust in possessions instead of the power of God.

That being said, I think we need to distinguish between two different uses of the term *wealth*. First is wealth as a status symbol, as a means of measuring your worth. This is very much aligned with the American Dream: to have the house, the toys, the nice clothes, the new car, and the financial freedom to do whatever you want. For this person, wealth is something to be possessed, and is a core part of his or her identity. With this definition, it is hard to argue that keeping and hoarding wealth is honoring to God. In fact, Jesus spoke explicitly against this in a parable in Luke 12.

There is another way to look at wealth, however, and one that I think can be used to honor God. For this definition, wealth is seen more as a resource, and as something to be used as a blessing to others. And while this blessing can take the form of feeding and clothing the poor, it is also used in hundreds of other, less noticeable ways.

For instance, the Christian owner of a large business may contribute generously to his church, favorite charities, missionaries, and families in need. But his impact goes far beyond what he gives financially. His business employs hundreds of people, thereby giving food and shelter to thousands in his community. His company spends millions of dollars on local vendors and suppliers, giving economic stability to the region. Yet, the Christian business owner does not view all of this as something he owns or possesses; rather, he sees himself as a steward of what God has given him. He is there to manage it, ensure it contributes to the community, and to use it in a way that honors God.

To summarize: wealth in and of itself is not evil, but the desire and pursuit of money can be wrong. For Christians, perhaps we could view money more like time: each bit is a gift from God; we can't own it or possess it; and we need to be good stewards and use it in a way that reflects the heart of God.

ECM: That's actually pretty similar to Singer's argument, if more moderate. Both you and he disclaim the accumulation of wealth for luxury or prestige, suggesting instead that it should be put to use helping others. As a utilitarian philosopher, he believes that help should go immediately to those in gravest need, while you acknowledge the important roles played by the people who make an economy work.

This is one of the first counterpoints that springs to mind when I consider the position I've endorsed above. The more wealth Christians control, some may argue, the better equipped they will be to perform good and charitable works. And if their wealth secures for them a prominent position in the community, their positive influence will extend with their networks. I find all of this to be reasonable.

Still, I think this may be a point at which Christianity and Americanism begin to merge in illogical ways. Wealth is an issue that Jesus spoke about very intemperately, after all, making radical statements that we like to water down or explain away—*woe unto those who are rich, for they have received their consolation* (Luke 6:24), *whoever does not give up all he has cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:33), *sell all you have and give to the poor* (Luke 18:22), etc.

Faced with declarations like these, it's hard to endorse the accumulation of wealth by any Christian, even when not necessarily driven by the love of money.

The example of the Christian businessman is not the best, in my view, because it's more exception than rule. Most people do not run large companies with hundreds of employees or contribute millions of dollars to local vendors. Instead, they are employed by a company, receive compensation for their labor, pay their bills and try to either A) sure up their finances through savings and wise investment, or B) live beyond their means and wrack up considerable debt. Or C), something in between.

Under these conditions, many Christians may find themselves tempted to pursue personal wealth on the grounds that it will make them better Christians—kind of like how, in *The Lord of the Rings,* people are drawn to the ring because its power could be used for good. If am wealthy, they think, I will be able to act as a great steward of that wealth, and use it to improve the lives of others. But that idea is tempting precisely because it sanctifies something we instinctively desire for ourselves. "You *can* be rich," the little voice whispers. "No, you *must* be rich! For the sake of others!"

There is something very seductive about the idea that you can be wealthy and Christian, and it enables the even sexier idea that you can be wealthy *because* Christian, that God will reward your faithfulness with earthly prosperity. I couldn't say for sure that either is entirely wrong, but I'm pretty skeptical of both.

BAS: You are right in saying that the desire for wealth is seductive, even for Christians. That's why people get very touchy when talking about it, especially within the church. As I said before, this discussion exposes one's motivation toward power, prestige, and prominence, which are all things Christ spoke against.

This brings to mind a strain of Christian teaching commonly called the Prosperity Gospel. This teaching says that if you are faithful to God, God will be faithful to you by giving you material blessings. It is most common in the writings and sermons of televangelists who ask people to send them money with the promise that they will get much more money in return—see the exposé by John Oliver if you aren't familiar with the tactics of these televangelists. At best they are misguided pastors who are focusing on the wrong things; at worst they are con artists who are preying on the very poor and powerless that Christ called his followers to serve.

Many of the words of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, were given in front of crowds. Large crowds filled with the sick, needy, and poor. But there were also rich people, including Roman officials, rulers, and religious leaders. Jesus had strong words for the wealthy, some of which you already quoted. We cannot avoid these condemnations, nor can we sugarcoat them.

My take on Christ's remarks on wealth is twofold: first, he is calling out anyone who finds their identity and value in wealth, and inviting them to rest in him; second, he is telling people that it is a sin to be wealthy and not aid your poor neighbor. Primarily, Jesus is calling out his rich audience members, whether they be the hypothetical rich man in Luke 16 or the rich young ruler in Luke 18. In both of these cases, the person's wealth was a manifestation of the person's inner heart, which was possessive, stubborn, and self-dependent. The message of Jesus to each was to drop your reliance on money, and instead turn to Christ.

In terms of what to do with the money, the response of Jesus is simple: give to those who need it. Considering the crowds surrounding Jesus, there was no shortage of people who needed help. A tangible way of loving your neighbor is to help him meet his physical needs for food, shelter, and medical care. And we see this on display in the early church right after Pentecost:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of the American Church is the socioeconomic separation of the church. For those who attend suburban churches filled with affluent people, it can be hard to see people in dire need. Rather, we read about them, watch a documentary, or hear a pastor or missionary talk about them. Churches and non-profits make it easy to give anonymously to local or foreign relief, without getting our hands dirty in actually knowing people and their struggles. This allows people to contribute to the needs of the poor and broken, without actually investing in them.

ECM: Here again, I see a lot of commonality between the radical and moderate positions, which sort of makes me question how moderate you actually are! But if we disagree on anything, I think it's a matter of emphasis. With Singer, I would emphasize the external, practical consequences of wealth accumulation, while you seem attentive to the internal, spiritual consequences.

Over the years, as I have sought out writers to explain to me how something like the Prosperity Gospel could exist, I've encountered a pretty consistent emphasis on the heart of the wealthy individual. What matters, these writers suggest, is not that the individual *is wealthy,* but *why* he is wealthy and what his desire for wealth says about the state of his heart. Money is not the problem, they say, but rather *the love of money*. And I'm not talking about PG apologists, necessarily, but rather mainstream Christian writers comfortable with a certain degree of Christian wealth.

Their argument is troublesome, in my view, for two reasons. First, because—as we've been discussing—it enables the gradual Americanization of a radical Christian tenet. Second, it seems to prioritize the spiritual health of one person ahead of the physical survival of many others.

Though there is certainly something to be said for the corrosive effects greed has on the soul of the greedy person, it seems to me that Christian writers are a little too quick to identify with that person, and so to grant him an undue empathy, as though his sin is a little more tolerable for being familiar. Christian critics have a history of drawing hard moral lines around the sins with which they've never struggled, while dealing softly with those that hit close to home. I think there is some of that at work in the discussion of wealth.

Which is why I would prefer to approach the issue as an external problem—as the withholding of needed resources, rather than on the decay of the relatable soul. As long as the focus is on the interior of the greedy individual, the earth's billions of impoverished people fall quickly out of focus, cast as extras in the story of a rich man's life.

The biggest problem with the Prosperity Gospel, in my view, is not that people believe it, but that it provides useful cover for those who want to position themselves between a pair of dismissible extremes. The Prosperity Gospel is ridiculous, they may say, but I'm also not going to sell all my possessions and give to the poor. Reassuring as this may be, it is not yet *Christian.* Christians aren't called to carve out a comfortable position in the respectable center. They are called—explicitly, I would say—to extremity, which is what makes so much of this discourse so incredibly perplexing.

BAS: You mention two extremes: on one side are health and wealth seekers, who equate faithfulness and obedience with physical rewards. On the other side would be the "Radical Christians" that eschew cultural norms by living a simple life, giving away most of their money, and trying tangibly to help the poor.

In my experience, most evangelical Christians in America would condemn the first extreme and be in awe of the second. They would be against the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel, and lift up the people making great sacrifices to care for others. And yet, they themselves are quite content living in the middle, or perhaps skewing to the prosperity side in practice.

This uplifting and exalting of radical Christians—like missionaries to a foreign culture, pastors, and those in full-time ministry—really bothered me when I was a pastor. Not because those in ministry weren't doing some great things to build up God's kingdom—

they definitely were. Rather, this idealizing of who many would consider to be "radical" Christians seemed to come from a mindset that this type of lifestyle wasn't expected from everyday Christians. It's as if they were saying, "That's great for you to be sacrificing so much; I'll be sure to contribute to your ministry, but I could never take those steps on my own."

The reason I would emphasize the inward condition of a person over the external is because I see a person's heart and soul as the source of their generosity or greed, and out of this condition comes their behavior in how they handle their finances. If we are going to get more Christians to take their own steps in supporting the needy, I think the best appeal is to the sense of caring for their neighbors. The focus turns from yourself and on to caring for your brothers and sisters—even if they are Christian, Muslim, or agnostic. This movement from inward to other-centric is hard for many American Christians, and it is what has been too often branded as "radical."

Fortunately, in certain strands of evangelical Christianity there are calls to live this sort of radical life. Pastors and writers like Francis Chan and David Platt are helping conservative evangelicals by marking a path past current cultural forms of Christianity and on to the compassionate teachings of Jesus Christ.

ECM: That's an excellent observation, and it captures the crux of Singer's argument. In the wealthy West, he says, people have shirked their moral *duty*, relegating it to the optional status of *charity.* He illustrates this—appropriately—with help from a parable.

Suppose you are walking to work one day, dressed in your nicest suit, and you notice a child drowning in a shallow pond. At this point, you have to make a choice. You can walk into the pond and save the child—ruining your suit—or you can let the child drown and so protect your suit.

For most people, this choice is no choice at all. The moral value of the child's life and the urgency of the danger demand action. The choice is so clear, in fact, that it corresponds to a pair of dramatic outcomes. If you save the child, you will be hailed as a hero. If you let the child drown—especially if you do so out of petty love for a suit—you will be reviled as a monster.

But something odd happens when we remove proximity from the equation. Suppose that, instead of drowning, the child is starving, and that instead of appearing right in front of you, she is somewhere in Africa. You live in a wealthy country and have disposable income that could grant this child a reprieve from suffering and death. But instead of sending every available cent to ensure her safety, you use that money to buy a large television, or a vacation, or let's say, a suit.

In that case, no one will condemn you for placing your own luxury ahead of a human life. In all likelihood, no one will notice.

For Singer, this is a major problem. We know to a certainty that, even today, there are people in parts of the world who are dying from wholly preventable causes and we who have the means to save their lives are not doing so, largely because we have prioritized our own luxuries ahead of their well-being. And because we think of charitable giving *as charity* rather than *as duty*, we don't even feel guilty about it.

Again, Singer is not a Christian. And yet, his urgent call to an outward-directed life is among the most inspiring, Christ-like articles I've ever read. Without question, it makes strenuous demands, sparing few American residents. In his follow-up essay, he indicts practically everyone making more than $30,000 per year, reminding us that "wealthy" is a relative designation. So while we will always be able to point an accusatory finger at people who are richer than we are, the difference between them and us will likely appear, to the rest of the world, negligible.

BAS: Your distinction of duty vs. charity is spot on, and lies at the heart of this entire discussion. Charity is often done out of the excess of the individual, like end-of-the-year giving to non-profits or physical donations to the local Goodwill. Charity giving is primarily me-focused, either done for the tax benefit or for making me feel better about what I do, rather than focused on the impact it will have on the recipient.

The type of giving that Christians should be striving for is giving marked by sacrifice. Like the gift of the widow in Luke 21:1-4, God desires Christians to give significantly. We are to give sacrificially, giving so much that we really feel it.

Everyone can be giving more than they currently are; each needs to figure out how much more they can give. This number will vary by person, by where they live, and by the needs of their neighbors. But the goal is to give as much as possible, in order to have a tangible impact on the least of these. This may mean making significant changes to your way of living, but that's okay. You may be literally saving someone's life.

III
Christianity, America, and *Politics*

ECM: We are having this discussion in the midst of an election season, when American Christians join in the process of observing, researching, and eventually committing themselves to candidates for public office. This is a fascinating national ritual, and one that I like to follow pretty closely—at least for a while. Election seasons have the power to unite Americans around a shared civic duty, even as they divide us into aggressive rival factions. So far you and I have been painting large matters with broad brushes, and that approach seems fitting here. The question before us: *Should American Christians be politically active?*

This may strike some people as a stupid question. The Christian citizen *is* a citizen, after all, with all the same rights and responsibilities afforded the non-Christian citizen. The exercise of those rights and responsibilities is, in a word, *political.*

Still, our method has been never to assume that an *American* virtue—like political engagement—automatically doubles as a *Christian* virtue.

For our purposes, I can think of at least two viable approaches to Christianity and politics.

First, it may be argued that Christian political commitment is an important tool for achieving Christian goals. The world is a fallen place, Christians are charged with making it better, and public policy should be swayed to the greatest degree in the Godliest direction. This mentality is very common across denominations and leanings, but perhaps with strongest expression among Christian Reconstructionists and others whose vision borders on the theocratic.

Second, there are some who would argue against political participation writ large. This separatist mentality suggests that Christians must find a way to be *in* the world without also being *of* it, and that this can only be achieved by consciously separating from world affairs. In this view, political participation constitutes an inappropriate worldliness, distracting the Christian from higher matters. Examples may be found among certain fundamentalists and the Amish.

If we can say that these are the opposing poles of complete political *commitment* and complete political *separation*, we might then be able to survey the ground between.

So let's start there. When you were pastoring, what did you tell your congregants about their relationship to politics?

BAS: When ministering in a local church, I was always amazed at how naïve and shortsighted people could be when it came to political discourse. Some people viewed their own political beliefs as the only views acceptable for Christians to hold. Others were single-issue voters, rejecting the rest of a candidate's or party's platform. Still others had compartmentalized things so completely that Sunday's message never impacted the rest of their lives, especially their votes.

Christianity as a whole should—and must—be able to speak truth into society and into the political realms. Rather than becoming the standard bearer for one party, the church should be a prophetic voice to both, helping steer culture towards morality, justice, and compassion.

When Christians identify themselves as members of a political party, they can start conflating their political and religious views into a hybrid. As we mentioned in a previous discussion, this leads to a form of Christianity that does not reflect the heart of Christ. When we embrace a single political party, we accept parts of the platform that do not align with the tenants of the faith, while also neglecting the positive aspects of the other party's platform. The us vs. them mentality that occurs within our two-party system can often demonize those across the aisle, even though there are some deeply committed Christians over there.

So I spoke less on specific policies and candidates and more on overarching themes of compassion, love, and caring for the least of these. I might identify the positive ways each party is looking to obtain this good, but also show where each has room to improve. That way, I could speak to each group within the congregation, without being dismissed or described as playing favorites.

A greater concern of mine was the prevalent view that we have just the right "fix" for America's ills. This narrative suggests that America is broken, and we just need our candidate in office or the right verdict from the Supreme Court in order to cure every single issue with America. Within some Christian circles, a religious angle is attached to this narrative, so the goal is to restore America to a Christian nation that is blessed by God.

Of course there are several flaws with this line of thinking—including giving any candidate too much credit for the amount of impact they can have, diminishing the impact of culture on the country, and failing to see the nuance in these debates. But most importantly, this narrative suggests that a Christian's hope be placed on a candidate or a political party, instead of Jesus Christ. Politicians, governments, and nations come and go, but for the Church, it is the word of God that remains forever.

ECM: There are certainly problems with Christian *partisanship*, and you have touched on a variety of these. They might be traceable both to commonalities and to differences between faith and party.

On the one hand, political parties are designed to achieve some pretty specific goals, which may not be the same goals that Christianity tries to achieve. Parties are competitive enterprises, designed to build coalitions, win elections, and enact a particular vision for the nation. They are interested in power, money, and influence. They are vulnerable to corruption. They trade, very often, in deceit. (They do some good and important things too, of course, but there's a reason why people tend to furrow their brows and roll their eyes at the very mention of politics and politicians.) If we understand Christianity as a faith

committed to virtues such as love, honesty, and humility, the two missions are not congruent.

On the other hand, the Christian attraction to party politics must have something to do with traits shared in common. Both are interested in boundary drawing according to right thinking. Both revere and defend certain orthodoxies. Both are—in their own ways—evangelistic. They contribute to your sense of self, telling you something about who you are and where you belong.

As you noted, loyalties to faith and party tend to bleed together into one entity, amplifying the commonalities while suppressing the differences. This hybrid mindset enacts a sort of mental reorientation, arranging the world according to narrative structures designed for voter mobilization rather than disinterested truth. This is a problem.

Still, I think this problem may be overcome if we revisit our understanding of politics and its functions.

Historically, our term *politics* is traceable to the Greek *polis*, referring to the *city-state* epitomized by Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and the rest. These days the world divides into nation-states rather than autonomous cities, but the terminology has stuck. We elect *politicians* who craft *policies* that are enforced by the *police.* Even our word *polite* finds its origin in the ancient Greek conception of political life, putting the *civility* in civilization.

In this sense, *politics* may be understood as the business of the community, something much broader and more foundational than the daily work of professional politicians and parties. In this light, being nice to your neighbors becomes a political act. So does obeying the law, mowing the lawn, paying the taxes, and recycling the recyclables, to say nothing of attending public meetings, serving on town councils, volunteering, etc. As long as we cede the political to the politicians, our contributions must rise and fall with their very capricious careers. Plus we only get to contribute on those select days when our ballots are cast—once every couple of years, or every four, or never.

So suppose we take a step back and think about political life first in terms of *daily* life in a communal setting. You have established your opposition to partisan Christianity. What forms can Christian politics reasonably take?

BAS: The truth is that most evangelical Christians have a flawed view of what it means to be a good citizen. As you stated earlier, the separatist and theocratic perspectives are both common Christian views of engaging with the world, but neither one is helpful in contributing to society as a whole.

In both of these cases, Christians have failed to see how delicate the balance is between engagement and separation. The church must contribute and add value to the greater community, but not at the point of domineering and controlling the community; nor should they be compromising to the point of being shaped by the community. To quote the title of an <u>influential book</u> on this subject, Christians are to see themselves as "resident aliens."

A helpful passage of Scripture that I turn to in these discussions is Jeremiah 29. Most evangelical Christians know verse 11 by heart:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

For many Christians, this passage gives them hope that everything in life will work out, and that God will make everything better. And while that may be true, in the greater context of Jeremiah 29, that's not what is being said in this verse.

The Babylonian empire had just conquered the nation of Judah, and the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the exiles now living in captivity. But his words were not the good news the people had hoped for. Instead, Jeremiah tells them to settle down because they would be staying there for a long time. God wanted them to become contributing members of society:

[S]eek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (verse 7)

The first step for the exiles of Judah to contribute to the Babylonian society was to seek peace, prosperity, and prayer for their new community. Instead of trying to retaliate by destroying Babylon from within, the exiles were to forgive, build houses, plant gardens, and prepare for seventy years of life there. This advice is just as applicable for American Christians today.

The best way for the church to influence the country is not by handpicking a candidate that will enact laws beneficial to Christians. Instead, the church's greatest impact lays with it actually being the church by displaying unconditional love, unpopular virtues and morality, and unwavering commitment to the marginalized.

ECM: I'm glad you went the *resident aliens* route, because that's exactly how I think about Christians' status in the world. It's also why I think Christian politics should have a different referent than party politics. As I observe these opportunistic candidates clamoring over each other to secure the "evangelical vote," I find myself wondering why these evangelical voters are subjecting themselves to the spectacle.

My understanding of Christian teleology is that human beings are on earth for a very short period, to be immediately followed by an eternity spent in Heaven, or in "New Creation," as you've put it. If that understanding is even remotely correct, then I think it must weigh *heavily* on how Christians spend their infinitesimally short lives on earth. In light of eternity, even a long human life is nothing more than a moment in time, a blip on the radar. We are here and then we are gone, with the promise of *real* life yet to come on a scale that is larger and longer and fuller and brighter by a factor of *infinity.* We are told that our status in that forever is dependent on decisions we make in the one shining moment that we've been given now.

And yet, preoccupied with a much smaller vision, millions of Christians choose to spend that beautiful, celestial moment ranting about immigrants, and welfare, and healthcare, and taxes.

When I was a kid, I used to practically split my brain in half trying to think about eternity clearly enough to place my life into proper perspective. If I were to draw my timeline, it would run for an unknown period of years, and then stop, and then continue on, and on, and on beyond that point and every other without ever stopping again. I couldn't process that, and the attempt left me feeling very conflicted about how I spent my time, given how frivolous all of my favorite activities seemed to be.

Life is short, I reasoned, *and eternity is long, and some people are heading toward hell, and here I am playing basketball! What a waste!*

Looking back, the little person I used to be returns to me in a haze of charming naiveté. But given the premises he was using, I don't think his conclusions were wrong. And since those premises remain central to the evangelical worldview, I really don't understand how the proposition has been written the way it apparently has:

Because life is so short, and because eternity is so long, and because everything hangs in the eternal balance for all human beings, we must repeal Obamacare!

It's not just that I associate so much of Christian politics with anger and ugliness, though full disclosure, I do. It's that despite many years of wrestling with the ideas, I don't know that I'm any more sympathetic to them. I don't accept that *this* belief system leads to *that* politics. And I don't know what anyone hopes to gain from it, in any lasting sense, if eternity is real.

BAS: I would agree with you that Christians' view of eternity should motivate them to use their time for greater things here on earth. And at one level, all Christians would get behind that statement. I think it's when we get into the details of what our lives are meant for that we would see the divergence of opinion.

In this discussion, I see two competing views on the Christian doctrine of end times (eschatology). The first one is called post-millennialism, and it teaches that the world will get better and better until everyone becomes a follower of Christ. At that point, Christ returns and sets up heaven on earth. This was a popular belief in the early years of the 20th century, but fell out of favor after the horrors of World War I. But in recent years there has been a resurgence of this teaching, which sees a Christian America as the start of this heaven on earth.

To them, America's blessing and status as a Christian nation has been disappearing, or even taken away from them. They believe it is their God-given mandate to make America a God-fearing nation, and once that happens, everything else will fall into place: hearts changed, lives saved, morals restored, and Christ returns.

Other strands of evangelicalism hold to an evacuation mindset. Relying heavily on passages of judgment and pre-millennial interpretations of the end times, proponents of this view argue for less involvement in the governance of the secular world, since it is all going to burn up one day. To these Christians, the most important thing is getting people saved, so they can be with Jesus one day too.

Of course, these descriptions are not so neatly defined, as people often hold to a blended view of both. So we see a dissonance, where people are preparing for the rapture but are using their time here on earth on matters with less-eternal consequences. I would attribute this to a growing trend of devaluing doctrine and the implications on everyday life.

From what I've seen in the lives of many Christians, they have a piecemeal theology that's influenced by authors, musicians, and reality TV stars. Christians will take what they hear, see if they like it, and find a spot for it within their belief system. The only critical thinking occurs when they check if it lines up with what they already believe, without seeing how it lines up with the teachings of Scripture.

That's how people can be excited to hear a politician spout fear mongering about Muslims. They don't see it as contradictory to Christ's command to love your neighbor, because they haven't thought that deeply about it. Instead, they know this talk lines up with their own fears of terrorism and views of America, so they accept it as truth.

ECM: I went through a period when I was interested in end times thinking. It came during the closing years of the 20th Century when I was told at Sunday schools and youth conferences that the end was very likely nigh. It wasn't, but that didn't stop Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins from making a zillion dollars off of the concern.

These days the two millennialisms seem to me like kitsch pieces from an earlier time, when people thought a little too hard about questions they couldn't answer. Whatever their merits, these narratives suggest that the end of the world is ultimately up to human beings to decide—an idea that, if true, may amount to self-fulfilling prophecy. Still, for those who are interested, Matthew Avery Sutton has a really good book about them.

Suffice it to say that I believe Christians have the potential to do great things in the world, provided their energies are correctly apportioned. We seem to agree that Christians have a mandate to live radical lives apart from the mainstream, deliberately calibrating their efforts to help the needy. In the political realm, they may prove—and at times, *have proven*—very influential at crafting humane, empathetic public policy. But very often, these days, they don't try. If anything, their efforts run counter to these goals.

I think there is an elephant in this conversation, and its name is *Republican.* Most of the devout evangelicals I know are confirmed Republicans, and most of them consider Republican party membership a sort of litmus test for being evangelical. There are reasons for this. In the late 1970s, when the pro-life movement was searching desperately for political champions, the GOP offered them a plank in the platform, effectively binding an emotionally resonant Christian priority to a list of others that were decidedly not. This

helps explain how a tradition overtly hostile toward wealth and compassionate toward the poor came to flip that script. It is impossible to talk about Christian politics without making this observation.

Still, that is not to suggest that Christians must register as Democrats—God knows I would never make *that* claim. But I think they really should take some time to reevaluate their relationship to partisan politics, maybe asking themselves whether there are less partisan, more *Christian* avenues for participating in the shared governance of the community.

BAS: To most Americans, a thoughtful Christian that's engaging civilly in the realm of politics and government is an oxymoron. This is partially due to the "crazy uncle" evangelicals who give the rest of us a bad name, but it is also due to the diminished attention given to those evangelical Christians who avoid partisanship, instead choosing to speak to both parties.

Perhaps an example of each can be found within the Graham family. Franklin Graham has openly endorsed the Republican Party, while making incredibly insensitive public statements. Meanwhile, Franklin's father, Billy Graham, sought to rise above political divides, and served as an advisor to several presidents, including Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon. Both consider themselves evangelical, and both thought they were doing their best as Christian citizens.

One final thought I'd like to add is to note the two-fold use of the term *evangelical* in this broader discussion. Used as a theological term by insiders and a political term by outsiders, more and more insiders are now conflating the two, equating political views with theological ones.

The way the term *evangelical* is now used by culture — especially when talking about politics — often describes white middle class Christians that predominantly vote Republican. They love guns, borders, and anyone who will repeal Obamacare.

Yet within Christian circles, the term *evangelical* is normally used to describe Christians who believe in the primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (the Greek word *euangelion* means "good news" and is where we get both evangelical and Gospel). This classification transcends denominations, income levels, race, and political affiliation, and would include plenty of non-white Democrats. While evangelicals would consider themselves conservative, it is in doctrinal terms, not political; in the political realm their support for immigrants, the poor, and the needy would be considered left of center.

If evangelical Christians would keep their focus on the hope and love found only through Jesus Christ, they would find they could have a greater, and much more positive, impact on society than they do through partisan politics. Rather than devoting themselves to a singular party's platform, Christians can encourage lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to promote causes that are near and dear to the heart of God, including causes that seek to increase life, forgiveness, and compassion in our nation.

IV
Christianity, America, and *Violence*

ECM: The other day I was stopped at an intersection, and there was a pick-up truck in front of me with decals on the tailgate. On the one side, there was a large, black cross. On the other, the equally large silhouette of an AK-47. Beneath these there was text: *I'll keep my guns and religion, and you can keep the change.* The light turned green, and the truck and I parted ways before I could snap a photo. But I think the scene is easy enough to imagine.

To me, the popular pairing of God-and-Guns offers one of the weirdest and most head-scratching examples of American-Christian value collisions. If it is difficult for me to visualize wealthy Jesus or political pundit Jesus, it is simply impossible to picture AK-47 Jesus.

Yet for many Christian citizens, gun ownership seems to be as sacred as church attendance. Of the Constitution's 27 amendments, perhaps none is so well recognized or recited as the second. Despite its anachronistic phrasing, each clause achieves the status of Scripture, written in red letters. And though the gun is ostensibly carried for protection, it has become a sort of American talisman—something that you might actually die *to protect*, something that must be pried *from my cold, dead hand.*

As you may have guessed, I have a problem with this. We have reached a point in this country where gun industry lobbyists can [credibly claim](#) that the answer to gun violence is ever and always *more guns*, and in saying so can sound very much like evangelical Christian leaders who [worship at the alter](#) of concealed carry.

The contemporary United States is home to a culture of violence, ranging from guns to militarism to the glorification of both in popular media. Some Christians have participated in this culture even as others have advanced pacifist objections to it. Here again, maybe we can start our discussion within that range of options. Do you think Christians may be armed? And is it ever justifiable for them to engage in violence?

BAS: I have personally seen my views on guns, warfare, and violence shift in the last fifteen years. At one point in high school I was on track to go to the Naval Academy, and to willingly become a part of the military industrial complex. But God had other plans, and instead I went the route of studying the Bible in seminary.

Since then, the more I have studied the Bible and especially the mindset of Christ and the early church, the further down the road towards pacifism and non-violence I have traveled. And since its sole purpose is to inflict violence, I find it increasingly difficult for any Christian to justify owning a gun.

These views on violence and gun ownership are definitely in the minority of evangelicalism, and especially in areas where I have served in the past. I remember several conversations with fellow Christians who were dumbfounded that I couldn't see the point

in owning a gun. One person actually sat there with his jaw open, unable to comprehend why I wouldn't own a gun for protection.

Aside from hunting, which is still a significant source of meat for many families in America, the most common reason people give for owning a gun is this vague desire for "protection." Sometimes it is directed toward a specific enemy (like when a Christian college president directs it against followers of an entire religion), while more often it is directed against unseen, unknown enemies. A third common reason for gun ownership is protection against tyranny. America was founded by rebelling against a tyrannical ruler, and since then, many of her citizens have had one hand on their pistol ready to draw against the next one.

All these reasons are heavily influenced by cultural conditions, and are deeply rooted in the American psyche. As we've noted before it is hard for many to disentangle what it means to be a Christian from what it means to be an American. If the troubling statistics of gun violence and the utter senselessness of each and every mass shooting won't get people off their gun fixation, maybe showing how it does not align with Christ's call for forgiveness and peace might do the job.

ECM: It seems to me that the love of guns—and I do think *love* is the correct term—is inherent to American culture, and so it is very important to distinguish between the *American* and the *Christian* here as elsewhere. If gun culture has historical resonance, it is also situated in particular places, for place-particular reasons.

Though we tend to split the American population according to political categories such as *liberal* and *conservative*, I think the most basic divide may run between *urban* and *rural.* As you mentioned, many people associate guns first and foremost with hunting and outdoor recreation, rural activities that may also have a central place in family traditions.

If you grew up in the country, you probably had a gun or guns in the house, along with fond memories of spending time with parents, siblings, cousins, and friends in gun-related activities, all without harming anyone or committing any crimes or otherwise doing anything for which you should be punished with new regulations.

So when politicians suggest that limits should be placed on gun ownership—especially while representing urban interests separate from your experience—you may take this personally and may be prone to push back in anger. You may even begin to include gun ownership within the larger package of traditionally rural values under threat from urban—liberal, secular—elites.

It is also probably the case that gun ownership as a means to protection makes more sense in the country than in the city. Whereas urban areas situate friends, neighbors, and police departments close by, country-dwellers may live a mile or more from their closest neighbors, and perhaps much farther from the closest law enforcement. In a situation like that, the defense of one's home and family may feel like a purely individual responsibility.

If you live in a town or city, by contrast, guns may have far different associations. Without the law-abiding exigencies of recreation or isolation, guns make headlines mostly for their use by criminals. Because there are so many guns in America, and because criminals seem to acquire them so easily, new regulations make a lot of sense—especially when they come in the form of magazine caps, background checks, licensing, and other moderate measures that do not target the sort of guns typically used for hunting.

As someone who grew up in a rural-ish area, and who now lives deep inside the Pennsyl-tucky wilds, I like to think I understand the motivations driving the "gun rights" lobby. But I don't think these are *Christian* motivations, for a couple of simple reasons. The first is that, in my reading, Jesus opposes violence in unequivocal language. To me his call to "turn the other cheek" amounts to a dismissal of violence *even in self-defense.* The second is that calls for unlimited gun ownership seem to be driven by a mostly irrational *fear*, an emotion that should have no influential place within a properly Christian perspective.

That so many people are buying guns out of fear—especially that of foreigners or Muslims or tyrannical government—indicates a high degree of cultural paranoia. This, I think, is something to be resisted rather than celebrated.

BAS: I would echo all of your sentiments: cultural affinity for guns, the fear associated with gun control regulations, and even that these desires do not reflect Christian morals or the teachings of Christ.

Good evangelicals like to find support for their beliefs within the pages of Scripture. Yet when it comes to owning guns, I find it very difficult—if not impossible—to make a compelling case from the Bible for guns. Not to say that Christians don't try; I have heard several Christian arguments defending gun rights, but all seem wanting.

Many are based solely on Old Testament passages, which I find to be problematic. Evangelicals believe in progressive revelation, which means that God has revealed more of himself over time, culminating in the ministry of Jesus. To base a moral standard solely on Old Testament passages neglects the works and teachings of Christ in the New Testament.

One argument that's based in the New Testament relies on Romans 13:1-7, which describes a Christian's relationship with governing authorities. I've actually heard some Christians argue that this passage limits the authority of the government agents to only those instances when they are obeying God; if they do not, then the authority reverts to the individual for self-governance. Owning guns ensures individuals can defend their liberty against tyrannical oppressors. Not only is this horrible exegesis, but it also establishes each individual as the ultimate judge of the government, which is God's role alone and *is exactly what Romans 13 is arguing against!*

Another argument is that it is a Christian's duty to be a defender and protector of life. While this may fit better in the abortion debate, I find it lacking in the gun control debate. In this context, the agent of protection is saving a life but at the cost of another life. Christians can't

be pro-life in one arena (abortion) while willing to take life in another arena (self-defense, capital punishment).

When I read the New Testament, I see Jesus demonstrating a level of peace, love, and forgiveness that goes well beyond human understanding. Jesus in the Gospels is the perfect example of pacifism, submitting to his oppressors even to the point of death. And while the Christ of Revelation is portrayed as a conquering hero, he's not brandishing a weapon. Rather, he is only armed with the words from his mouth (Revelation 19:15), which causes the multitudes to bow down and worship him (Revelation 19).

Nowhere in the New Testament do I read of Christ seeking to kill anyone, not even those who sought to kill him. This leads to the Christian's call to follow Christ's lead in receiving suffering instead of inflicting it. While he is God and we are fallen human beings, we can still strive to follow his perfect example of love and peace.

American Christians may have several reasons for wanting to own a gun. But Scripture can't be one of those reasons. Instead, I would argue that the words of Christ point in the opposite direction.

ECM: The proof-texting of gun culture seems analogous to most forms of proof-texting in that it tends to place the wagon before the horse—the Christian holds a view that he wants to be Biblical, so he sets about carefully selecting verses to make it so. Then he presses the case in pulpit or in print, and the like-minded repeat it. (Those who disagree, if they disagree strongly enough, start a new church.)

But I think that our bizarre sanctification of guns and militaries and war is more involved than just opportunistic exegesis. In fact, I suspect it is traceable to a mix of cultural forces, some that are particular to America, and some that are distinctly evangelical.

One of the many gun-relevant issues facing both the United States and the evangelical church has to do with gender, and specifically with *masculinity*. In each venue, conceptions of manhood—like those of womanhood—have been much contested in recent decades, prompting backlash campaigns in response to cultural change. In each venue, this backlash has been championed by tough-talking men committed to traditional gender roles.

In his very good documentary, *Tough Guise,* Jackson Katz argues that the problem of violence in America is largely a byproduct of "toxic masculinity," a vision of manhood based on aggression and violence that is pressed upon boys as the appropriate way to be a man. Though we have tended to trace gun violence to video games, goth music, mental health issues, or other root causes, Katz observes that guns are almost always wielded by *men*, meaning that answers must be sought in what we take manhood to be.

Rather than training young men to be thoughtful, deliberative, humble, and compassionate—qualities that we tend to associate with the *feminine*—our culture teaches them to be tough, aggressive, and dominant, and to prove themselves in competition with each other. If we can appreciate the extent of this influence, Katz argues, we can perhaps

begin to understand why so many young men are so enamored of guns, and so quick to act out in violent ways.

The embrace of violent masculinity by American culture finds ready expression in the conservative evangelical community because of its steadfast opposition to any progressive understanding of gender. Always nostalgic for a time when women were women and men were men, evangelicals have proven vulnerable to many a tough-talking, patriarchal pastor, always advancing some version of the decline-of-Christian-man narrative.

This helps explain why a Christian college president might step into the pulpit and brag about the weapon he hides under his jacket.

Gendered thinking that elevates men above women and endorses aggressive masculinity continues to dominate conservative evangelicalism, lending cover to the sanctification of guns and violence in America. It's a potent mix, and difficult to oppose, especially when it is endorsed by so many in leadership, and backed by so much political power.

BAS: This aggressive masculinity within some strands of evangelicalism feels juvenile, not only for the ridiculous nature of it all, but also because it takes away from the core tenet of Christianity: the love of Jesus Christ.

The bravado and machismo feels juvenile because it is hollow. These pastors and leaders aren't aiming these claims at culture as a whole; they are speaking them in front of audiences who agree with them wholeheartedly. Just like a Donald Trump rally, these statements are given in an echo chamber, surrounded by supporters who will agree with anything they have to say, no matter how offending or contrary to Scripture it may be.

Another appeal of the hyper-masculinity talk is its novelty. Sermons can get boring and repetitive, especially if you've grown up in the church. So when a pastor comes along and speaks differently, either boldly or using curse words, it can attract a lot of followers. Liberty University students are used to Convo speeches about political matters, since almost every candidate has passed through Lynchburg on the trail. But when the University President brags about his gun and what he will do with it, it is something new.

I've seen this type of talk plenty of times in youth ministry. Churches rely on college-aged students and adults in their twenties to minister to teens, largely because they have the energy and ability to understand youth culture. But without much life experience or discipleship of their own, these youth leaders default to bold—even explicit—statements that would get the applause of hormonal teenage boys. And since the trend is for what works in youth ministry to make its way to the broader church, this is how the youth pastors of the 90s create the pastors of the 2000s who view women as a home for your penis.

Above all, this bravado and masculinity that promotes violence gets away from the main point of Christianity: to live a life that's been changed by Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't die so you can be a macho tough guy. Nor did he die so you can ridicule others, view your wife as a sex

tool, or brag about how you will kill people with different beliefs if they step foot on your campus.

The path Jesus established for his followers is one of submission and self-sacrifice. You can't be following that path if you are seeking to destroy your enemy. And you definitely can't be following that path if you are dominating or oppressing anyone, regardless of gender, religion, or belief.

ECM: If being an evangelical means having access to the *good news,* and if the good news reports that one can have redemption and salvation in Christ, then the popular association between God and guns is entirely incomprehensible. If to live is Christ and to die is gain, then there is nothing to fear in death. And if death is powerless, then there is nothing to fear from anyone who would seek to kill you. If the Christian's faith is real, then "self-defense" is an unintelligible concept.

We are told that Jesus went willingly to his death, and that many of his followers did the same. Their example should matter.

And yet, thankfully, odds are very high that the question of gun death will ultimately prove irrelevant to everyone reading this. Despite the prevalence of shootings in this country, they remain extraordinarily rare in any given place at any given time. In my 30-some-odd years I have never witnessed one, and in all likelihood I never will. Even without the hope of afterlife, concealed carry is generally symptomatic of paranoia. In any case, the probability that you will be shot is considerably lower if you don't own a gun.

The impulse that connects God with guns is entirely cultural, and destructive in a variety of ways. Those who preach gun ownership in the name of hyper-masculinity mislead and deceive their hearers. Those who embrace guns for political purposes prostitute their faith. And those who tout guns alongside militarism and war trade their Christian perspective for something wholly foreign to it.

I understand the fear that drives people to carry guns, and how gun manufacturers have persistently exploited that fear to expand their markets. I also understand that those who endorse gun ownership may find this hardline position unreasonable. But here again, I'm arguing that Christianity *is* unreasonable, practically by definition. Those who find that it isn't may not have found it at all.

BAS: By trusting in Christ, Christians place their future, their present, and every aspect of their lives into his hands. Since he is the Creator of the cosmos, the giver of every breath, and the one who knows and sees all, it makes sense for a Christian to have complete confidence in this Supreme Being. Yet the reasons many people cite for owning a gun—for self-defense, protection, or "I hope to never use it"—take the power away from God and place it solely on the one holding the gun.

All Christians are called to constantly check their own lives and to root out sin and idols that keep us from fully trusting God. And for some American Christians, the cultural

commitment to owning guns without any restrictions or limitations is an idol held above and beyond their view of God. Likewise, the personal desire for protection and safety can turn into the sinful desires for control, power, and individualism, all of which take Christ off the throne of your life.

I'm not here preaching passivity or inaction; there are reasons we have locks on doors, passwords on online accounts, and a justice & police system to establish order in our communities. But as individual Christians, we should be seeking love and forgiveness and peace in every portion of our lives, and a gun cannot provide that. Some argue that, when in the hands of law-abiding citizens, a gun is an instrument of justice and upholding the peace. But that peace comes at a cost: violence, injury, and death. Peace won through violence is not really peace at all, and definitely not the type of peace that transcends all understanding.

V
Conclusion

ECM: The idea for this exchange came to me a few months back while I was watching the evening news. The coverage was about Donald Trump or Ted Cruz or some other horrible person claiming to be Christian and it occurred to me in that moment that I had not been to church in consecutive weeks in more than ten years.

Though I was raised in the church and attended consistently through college, my adulthood has been essentially agnostic. There are several reasons for this, but one has to do with the frustration I felt observing how Christians tended to approach wealth, politics, and violence, among other topics. In time these reached a tipping point, and I no longer wanted even to be associated. So I stopped participating, if not actually ruminating and talking and writing.

In that time, I've observed that critiques of American Christianity tend to produce one of two reactions in people—either defensiveness from those who subscribe or enthusiastic agreement from those who do not. Neither feels productive.

So instead I thought I might send my thoughts to you, and that you might set me straight in a way that could prove edifying to both of us, along with anyone else who chose to listen in. That plan has clearly failed, if only because you have been surprisingly quick to agree. But that's interesting in itself. Though you and I agree on very many things, those shared opinions have driven you to the chapel even as they've driven me to the coffee shop. So let me ask you this—given all the problems you see in how Christianity is practiced in our place and time, what keeps you going?

BAS: First off, let me thank you for this opportunity to have a virtual dialogue about the struggles of the American church. I appreciate your honesty about your own personal struggles, as well as your levelheaded handling of each of these discussions.

The reason I've been quick to agree with many of your critiques is because they have been spot on and true. The truth is that, as a whole, the American evangelical church—or more specifically, the American evangelical church culture—has drifted away from the heart of Christ in many areas.

Many of these are issues we've covered in our discussion, including embracing violence by defending guns, misappropriating our wealth and financial resources, or becoming a de facto religious arm of the Republican Party. And there are many we failed to cover in our discussion, including the hypocrisy of sexual ethics within the church, the overemphasis of faith-based or family-friendly entertainment, the celebrity pastor/author issue, and the rapid increase of xenophobia.

For all of our critiques, however, I believe the church in America is still a source of life, hope, and encouragement to millions of people, both here and abroad. I've personally seen how drug addicts and child molesters break down and completely change their lives due to

the mercy of Jesus Christ. I've seen relationships mended, families restored, new families started, starving children fed, and people get back on their feet—all within the context of local church ministries.

The reason why I've stayed in the church is because, despite all its shortcomings, God still seems to be using the church in America to change lives. And I want to be a part of that change, helping people see the hope and love that only Jesus can provide. Moreover, I want to see the church as a whole change, becoming more humble, more countercultural, more compassionate, and closer reflecting the heart of Jesus. That type of change is hard, and it can only come from within.

ECM: I can understand that. I am not so cynical as to believe that the church does *no* good, and in fact some of the best people I know are active churchgoers.

Yet I also have my doubts that this status quo is the result of a correctable "drift away." I suspect disappointment is something of an inevitability in times like these, when worldly temptations lend themselves to rationalization. The heart of Christ is extremely demanding, and practically nobody lives the sort of life prescribed by the gospels. So when I read that *narrow is the way and few who enter in,* I think that has to be taken seriously if it is to be taken at all.

Maybe someday in the sweet by and by a certain set of people will arrive in heaven and find that it's actually a pretty small place, home to about fifty people. And if hell turns out to be real maybe those who arrive there will find themselves surrounded by untold billions, many of who had spent their entire lives scolding others for their various sins. Maybe we will all be surprised for one reason or another.

Though you remain committed to the faith, you did decide to stop pastoring after ten years of service. Did any of this subject matter contribute to that decision? And is that something you see yourself returning to some day?

BAS: While my recent move out of the ministry happened for several reasons, some of these frustrations with the American Christian culture played a part in the decision.

Within ministry circles, evangelical churches can fit within one of two categories: traditional (sometimes called established churches) and missional churches. Traditional churches focus inward, meeting the needs and wishes of their members, like a <u>civic social club</u>. Missional churches focus more on the unbeliever, shaping their entire culture around caring for and reaching their neighbors. Much of our conversations have dealt with the culture found in most traditional churches.

A pastor who is looking to revitalize a traditional church and help members live a life that more closely resembles the compassion of Jesus Christ faces an uphill battle, often going against a specific church's traditions, structure, and the experiences and preferences of individual members. In some cases, pastors are able to help a church see where they need to change and make the changes necessary to be relevant and effective in the 21st century.

But in many other cases, they cannot break through and the church refuses to change. It's no wonder why so many young pastors instead seek to plant a new church.

As for my future role in ministry, I do see myself remaining active with a local church, but most likely in a volunteer role.

ECM: Do you think conservative evangelicalism is capable of correction? And would you ever consider joining a more progressive body?

BAS: While much of our discussion has been critical of evangelical Christian culture in America, I still see much to celebrate and clear signs of hope for the future. I see churches that are willing to forsake conservative cultural norms and embrace compassion for the oppressed and marginalized. Popular authors like Tim Keller, David Platt, and Francis Chan, while not perfect, are helping move parts of evangelical Christian culture in a better direction.

Many aspects of current conservative evangelicalism may not last for much longer. But that's okay. This church has lasted for almost 200 years in various forms. And despite its many past failings, the church has—and continues to have—an impact on individuals both on the inside and outside.

I see enough movement within certain strands of evangelicalism—towards nonviolence, generosity, and speaking across the political aisle—that I have hope in the future of evangelicalism (or whatever it may be called in the future) without sacrificing my theological beliefs to join a progressive church.

ECM: There have been many points in the past ten years at which I have decided that it is time for me to make my peace with evangelicalism and to move on to whatever is next. But these don't seem to stick. It was shortly after one such moment, in fact, that I chose to write a dissertation about Christian Right activism. Then I did that, and a few other things, and now here we are.

I've looked into progressive churches myself, and I am aware that there are strains of evangelicalism far more consistent with Christian-ness as I understand it. But I don't have quite the same drive anymore. I've broadened my interests and turned them in new directions and found that I can make positive contributions to my community and to the world without attributing them to any religious doctrine.

In a strange way this has put my conscience at ease. I no longer hold myself to impossible moral standards or patrol my thoughts for every appearance of sin. I've also stopped professing things that I don't really believe and trying to persuade others to believe things I don't really believe myself. In this way my descent into sin has made me a more honest person.

So finally, now that we have covered all of this ground and explained ourselves to each other, what can be said to someone in my position by someone in yours? What can be said to this generation of young people to get them back in the ~~pews~~ stadium seating?

BAS: Thanks for your honesty and openness in describing your journey out of evangelicalism; unfortunately too many people are less open and even ashamed of their struggle with and doubts about Christianity. If I could only help those currently going through this journey—and Christians as a whole—talk about, engage, and even embrace their doubts and questions, I think we would have a better church.

What I can say to you, Eric, and to others in your position is that I'm sorry that the church as a whole, or perhaps a specific church, has turned you away from Christianity. The truth is that most churches are not equipped or prepared to care for those with doubts or questioning their faith. Just press on, they say, or just believe and everything will be all right; not only does that not answer doubts, it often pushes people further away.

Sermons, lessons, and discussions can focus too much on cultural issues, doctrinal preferences, or debating moral standards, instead of engaging with other perspectives and listening to what they have to say. There's no wonder why Christians are more known for what we are against (marriage equality laws, abortion, and gun restrictions) than what we are for (faith, hope, and love).

For all our discussions about the poor cultural choices and failings the church has made, we've missed what is at the heart of Christianity: the belief that **God saves and redeems the broken**. This belief goes well beyond political discussions, worship preferences, and personal morality standards. It's a statement that most within the church take for granted, as it can be hard for those both inside and outside the church to fully grasp the gravity and meaning behind it.

So my encouragement to you and any readers who have become disillusioned with evangelical Christianity is to look past our messiness and problems, ignore our (seemingly growing) list of crazy spokesmen, and to see the core claim of Christianity: that Jesus Christ gives hope to the hopeless, encouragement to the downtrodden, and strength to the weak.

This has been a five-part conversation about American Christianity. Visit Brandon at his website, liveagreaterstory.com, or follow him on Twitter [@brandonschmidt](https://twitter.com/brandonschmidt).