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Christian Identity Meets Identity Politics: A Lutheran Approach to Political Engagement

Michael Hanson
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, hansonmi@csl.edu

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY MEETS IDENTITY POLITICS: A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Michael B. Hanson
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Approved by:	Rev. Dr. Leopoldo A. Sánchez	Dissertation Advisor
	Rev. Dr. Joel D. Biermann	Reader
	Rev. Dr. David R. Schmitt	Reader

To Christians living in America.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

St. Paul writes in Romans 6 “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:3–4) These verses summarize the ultimate goal of this dissertation: that Christians should embrace their baptismal identity and walk in the new life baptism brings. However, they also describe the process by which this dissertation came about. Just as a Christian can never go about his faith alone but must find community in Christ’s church, there are many in the community of my life to whom I must give credit and thanks for their role in producing this.

Concordia Seminary is truly a gift from God to his church. As a Master of Divinity student preparing for fulltime service in the church as a pastor I was frequently challenged and pushed beyond what I thought possible, and in the process they fostered a desire to continue learning even as I began serving in the church after graduation. The vision to create a Doctor of Philosophy degree track for pastors serving in congregations gave me the opportunity to return and continue learning in a rigorous academic environment, but further to do so in a way that constantly not only improved my academic skills, but also made me a better pastor. The many professors that I had for classes contributed to these ends, and I thank them.

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avenue for entering the church-state conversation. Without that suggestion, this dissertation would not exist. Joel Biermann and David Schmitt likewise both provided a lot of resources and many great conversations in the classes I had with them in this program, and beyond that they served as readers of this dissertation. Without their contributions this paper would not be what it is, and I am much happier with the product because of their contributions than I would have been without. Beyond the faculty, Concordia Seminary has many great employees who serve in other functions, and I am thankful for their friendship and roles in helping produce this as well, including the director of the graduate school Beth Hoeltke, and the registrar Beth Menneke.

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Soli Deo Gloria.

ABSTRACT

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Identity politics has become a frequently referenced and much maligned term used to describe a trend in political engagement in the early 21st century. Identity politics is employed across the political spectrum and has critics on both the left and right in the United States. *Christian Identity Meets Identity Politics* examines the contours of identity politics to understand and consider the concerns which lead neighbors to engage in identity politics, accounts for the needs of those neighbors who are denied God’s gift of justice through the state, considers criticisms leveled against identity politics within the greater view of Western liberalism, critically examines how various forms of Christian political engagement function in ways that are congruent with identity politics, and finally posits that proper Lutheran engagement is able to avoid the negative tendencies of identity politics while also affording the Lutheran the opportunity to account for the needs of neighbors highlighted by the turn to identity politics.

In order to accomplish this, *Christian Identity Meets Identity Politics* proposes a lens as a model for examining the relationship between core convictions, identity, relationship to neighbors, and goals for the state. Using this lens, four common Christian approaches to political engagement are explored, and their inability properly to account for the concerns of identity politics, either by themselves engaging in a form of identity politics, or by failing to account for the legitimate concerns of the neighbors in the state. Finally, *Christian Identity Meets Identity Politics* explores the work of contemporary Lutheran scholars to argue that a properly formed Lutheran identity accounts for the legitimate needs of the neighbors in the state and does so while avoiding the temptation to participate in an identity politics form of political engagement.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

How should Christians understand and engage political life from a theological perspective that informs their identity and activity in the world and the state? Christians in America have offered a number of answers to this question grounded in particular assumptions about and proposals for understanding the relationship between the church and the world. For instance, for some Christians in mid-twentieth century America, it was a highly plausible proposition to consider the transformation of society as their highest calling. Christian life in America was relatively comfortable, arguably drawing no apparent opposition from the state. The concept of America as a special nation because of the role of religious liberty in its founding prevailed.[1]

Moreover, there was a belief shared by some Christians across the political spectrum that adherence to doctrine would produce a harvest of virtue and blessing for the nation, either in fulfilling the liberal virtues of tolerance and progress, or the evangelical eschatology that anticipated Jesus' reign being fulfilled in America.[2] This optimistic view certainly had many adherents, and its goal seemed noble but was ultimately misdirected: "The suggestion is not that mankind can by its own efforts create a more holy culture, but that through the action of grace, this can happen. This leads to the idea of a Holy Christian community here on earth, visibly set

[1] Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1999), 165. Dobson, in observing a list of theologically flawed statements characteristic of the Religious Right, lists "*America has a Most Favored nation status with God*" as first on his Top Ten list.

[2] At the beginning of his *Lost Soul*, Hart notes: "The argument of this book, as idiosyncratic as it may seem, is that the Protestant-inspired notion that faith produces compassion, virtue, and harmony—that is, that religion is a benign influence that affects everyday life positively—is what is wrong with American Protestantism." D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2002), xvii. To be sure, Hart is also aware that not all church bodies or Christians cared to carefully guard the doctrine of the church. There were of course many attitudes toward doctrine, some who did not care about "doctrine" at all and were convinced that only practice mattered. Others eschewed doctrine all together.

apart from non-Christian culture."[3]

As H. Richard Niebuhr rightly noted in his *Christ and Culture*, the question of the relationship between Christ and culture, or for our purposes church and state, is enduring. The changes in demographics since Niebuhr—in particular, the de-Christianization of America—has raised new challenges for Christians as they consider their place in the world. The concept of a Christian America is wholly unintelligible today. Christian life in America no longer carries the expectation of privilege, and cultural Christianity has coincidingly declined; doctrines once held by most Christians are dismissed or rejected within many denominations; and even within the more doctrinally sound church bodies, Christians who fail to adhere to certain political doctrines have the validity of their Christianity questioned.[4]

Christian Identity Meets Identity Politics

In this post-Christian context, Christians have struggled to discern how they ought to think about themselves in a world which has changed from being friendly to Christian convictions to being increasingly hostile toward them. One of the approaches that has received a lot of attention is identity politics. According to this approach, a group united around a particular identity seeks to redress grievances through means of political activity. The turn to identity politics has been a part of American life for a long time, but has arguably grown worse leaving society more intensely fragmented around numerous group identities in recent years. Identity politics has not only been influential outside of the church, but within it. Indeed, at times "Christian" identity is

[3] Angus Menuge, ed., *Christ and Culture in Dialogue* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 1999), 42.

[4] A good example is a story related by Ed Dobson in which he recounts his decision to not have his church participate in signing a petition to force a vote on a gay rights ordinance passed in his community. He writes: "The petition drive fell short of the number of signatures needed. Some people blamed our church for this failure. I received many nasty phone calls and letters…The tone of the conversations and letters was hateful. I am thankful I am not gay: Seeing the way other Christians treated me, I can only imagine how they would treat gay people." Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 160.

used in an identity-politics driven way in order to respond to the loss of privilege that the church has experienced. By seeking to restore her influence or power in society, the church's unique identity and role in the world is minimized as the church becomes just one of many potential identities a Christian may choose to engage the world. The church's theological identity is thus changed from focusing on living out her faith in the world according to her place in God's story of his rule in creation through his two realms to a primarily political, and sometimes self-serving, focus on changing America's culture or society.

Engagement in this form of identity politics not only robs the church of her theological identity, but also prevents the church from hearing the cries of neighbors who have legitimate needs—an important concern raised by identity politics today. The church often finds herself either at odds with those who would turn to identity politics as a means to air their grievances before the state, or perhaps uninformed about the legitimate concerns that a marginalized group would raise. In this regard, the church does well to listen to the cries and hopes of these neighbors in order to properly respond to them from her own theological core convictions.

In our highly politicized and divisive times, Lutherans are no less susceptible to the lure of identity politics than other Christians or identity groups. Alternatively, Lutherans might recognize some of the challenges raised by identity politics and dismiss it altogether, thus not considering the reasons people may turn to it. This dissertation seeks especially to inform Lutherans about the characteristics and challenges of identity politics for the church. The deeper issue, however, is whether the church in America, including The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), has a clear understanding of its role in the state that follows from a more fundamental theological identity based on core convictions. In this dissertation, we will show that the Lutheran teaching of God's rule in his two realms and through vocations provides a

theological framework for faithful witness in the polis—a framework that allows the church to engage the world according to God's story of his purposes for the world, even as the world around her asserts its own reasons for political engagement.

In America, liberalism has become most influential in determining political identity. In short, the story of Enlightenment liberalism envisions a society which, being liberated from external forces, works itself out in an increasingly just, moral, and equal society for all people. It envisions a world where all people are truly free to be their own autonomous selves, yet in which they still live together in communities organized around certain supposedly shared values, such as freedom, liberty, justice, and equality. This understanding, according to Patrick Deneen, plays out in both progressive (politically left-leaning) and conservative (politically right-leaning) interpretations of our classically liberal politics, both of which appeal to Christians and Christian concerns at various points. Further, he argues, both are so committed to the project of liberalism that neither can lead the way beyond that which is causing the political chaos we see today.[5] The problem, for Lutheran Christians, is not trying to solve the political chaos, but rather admitting and reckoning with the fact that the commitments of liberalism quite often run contrary to the commitments formed by Scripture, not because Christians are against freedom, liberty, justice, or equality, but because we understand these terms very differently than the way world defines them. The question becomes, if not liberalism, what then should ground and drive our political engagement? More specifically, what should be the basis and goals of Lutheran political life in the state?

A key issue in identity politics is the role identity plays in political life. This is also a key issue for the church. What does political engagement look like for someone who approaches the

[5] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 18.

world with a clear sense of his or her identity in Christ? On the one hand the primary orientation of the church's identity is not political in some partisan way. This is a theological understanding that the LCMS is (or should be) both intensely aware of and willing to offer to the Christian Church as a whole in a time of identity politics. On the other hand, this understanding is not to say that the church is apolitical, indeed the church has a responsibility to speak to the politicians and political issues of the world. The Lutheran teaching does not allow for quietism. The deeper issue lies in understanding that Christian identity is crucial for understanding one's relationship to creation and the world, including both the church and the state. Ideally, a clear sense of theological identity grounded in core convictions allows Christians to discern faithful engagement in the polis without falling into extremes such as a strict separation or divorce of church and state, or an amalgamation of church and state into one religious or secular nation.[6] Christians might then rightly argue against a progressive agenda that demands the state be purified from all vestiges of religion.[7] Or they might guard against either the secular assumptions or naïve spiritual optimism of fellow Christians who attempt to unify the church and state into one realm or kingdom (secular or religious) from either side of the political spectrum.[8]

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[6] See especially Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God's Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017).

[7] See Robert Benne, *Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995). In the second chapter, Benne argues rightly that the influence of Mainline Protestants in thinking about public theology has waned while Catholic and "Neoconservative" Christians have seen their influence grow. The reason for this growth is that "a great affinity is being increasingly realized among the orthodox of all religious traditions. Catholics, Lutherans, evangelicals, and Protestants of the mainstream tradition who hold orthodox convictions often feel closer to each other than they do to progressives in their own denominations" (54).

[8] Thomas and Dobson, for instance, note that "all politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, love God. Or more accurately, they love to use God to baptize their political agendas." Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 83. The temptation to argue that "God is on our side" is prevalent and will be seen throughout this dissertation. Thomas adds advice for Christian politicians to "be sincere, and…be very careful about using God-talk to manipulate voters." (88) Using "God-talk" to manipulate voters is always wrong, however speaking clearly what God has revealed is imperative to living the Christian life, whether one is a politician, voter, citizen, or resident of a nation.

Furthermore, Christians might also look with suspicion at narratives of America's privileged status as God's chosen nation in the world, America as a land of freedom (nowadays, popularly understood as freedom from structures), or America as a collection of feeling selves struggling for recognition.

A clear and compelling understanding of our Christian identity allows us to see all of life in terms of our relationship to God and our fellow humans in creation, taking seriously both of these dimensions of our creatureliness in our political life. A Christian who has a clear understanding of her identity in Christ also rightly views her neighbor, and as such is then prepared to consider modest yet crucial goals for her engagement in the state. But what should frame her approach to theological identity, relationship to neighbors (including the marginalized "other"), and goals for political engagement in the state? For the Christian, core doctrines frame core convictions. These core convictions about God's dealings with creation in Christ show us who we are and who our neighbor is, and then guide our political activity in the world through our vocations.

Christian attempts to deal with concerns of liberalism and fundamentalism are frequent in Evangelical circles, but much less prominent among Lutherans. It is true that Lutherans have acknowledged the challenges to the church presented by both theological liberalism and blind fundamentalism;[9] however, Lutherans tend to be more engaged in demonstrating their lack of

[9] See, for instance, Jeffrey S. Walz and Steven R. Montreal, *Lutheran Pastors and Politics: Issues in the Public Square* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007). The authors accept the concept of a culture war and demonstrate how pastors in the LCMS approach a variety of issues on both sides of the political and theological aisle. This suggests that there is not a simple answer to the challenge, which indeed there is not. Both liberal and fundamentalist Christians have valid concerns and blind spots. Historically, Lutherans have seen the need to distance themselves from both of these theological tendencies; Lutherans see the results of the relationship between liberal and fundamentalist churches and the present political situation. For example, Dale Meyer recognizes the similarities of the commitments of both political parties today, and how they do not constitute a Christian vision. Therefore, he argues, Christian preachers are "not going to take political positions in our preaching and teaching but we should show our people how changed attitudes and practices in today's culture challenge and subtly undermine basic

quietism, especially when the two realms has been misunderstood and misapplied by a variety of critics.[10] In general, Lutherans have tended to view themselves as independent operators based on unique theology rather than readily associating with either of the prevailing political options in the United States. As such, while Evangelicals write much about political matters, Lutherans tend to write more about theological concerns. D. G. Hart recognizes this when he labels the LCMS as representative of its own engagement, one that, by her liturgical nature, risks irrelevance.[11] Again, in the typology of Hunter, the LCMS does not find a clean home, since the LCMS does not identify with any of his models. To that end, it is hardly surprising that in a world of divisive identity politics, the Lutheran voice still needs to be heard.[12] How do Lutherans contribute to a Christian understanding of theological identity in the world, and how does such identity shape a constructive approach to political engagement in America today that addresses the challenge of identity politics? This question is the impetus for our thesis.

The Thesis

I propose to write a dissertation to argue that the Lutheran teaching of God's rule in

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Christian beliefs, especially the Ten Commandments. The liberalism dominating today's culture is a piñata for our preaching of the law." Dale A. Meyer, "Preach Politics?" *Concordia Journal* 46, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 11; at a more popular level, on the website for the LCMS (lcms.org) one can also find an electronic version of the Christian Cyclopedia, which contains entries opposing Lutheran understanding to liberalism (called modernism) and fundamentalism. See Erwin Lueker, ed., *Christian Cyclopedia* (St. Louis: Concordia), http://cyclopedia.lcms.org/default.asp

[10] See, for instance, the variety of essays in Menuge, *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*. In this book, the authors work to state positively the impact and opportunity of Lutheran political engagement, and do so in order to demonstrate the misunderstandings of Lutheranism perpetuated in Niebuhr's understanding. Consider also the special treatment Biermann gives to the topic in Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, chap. 1 and 2; see also Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007).

[11] Hart, *Lost Soul*, chap. 6.

[12] One mention is made of identity politics in Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Beyond Facebook Love: Luther's Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other," *Concordia Journal* 46, no.4 (Fall 2020): 25. However, his brief mention pairs identity politics together with tribally framed theological engagement, which when combined have destructive results for the neighbor. This dissertation is an attempt to address more fully identity politics from a theological perspective.

creation in his two realms and through vocations in service to neighbors offers a critical lens to evaluate the challenge of identity politics as it functions in America today. Moreover, the dissertation argues for a positive constructive approach to political identity and engagement grounded in the Lutheran teaching in a world of identity politics. In order to accomplish this, I propose to use a fourfold lens to analyze how identity politics, theological approaches to the church's role in the world (and the state), and Lutheran contributions dealing with political life make the move from core convictions to identity, from identity to relations with the neighbor (including the "other"), and from relations to neighbor to forms of political engagement in the state.

The application of Lutheran theology to the challenge of identity politics will foster an appreciation for engaging political life from core theological convictions, in the framework of God's purposes for his creation in each realm (spiritual and temporal, including church and state), and in ways that account for the role of legitimate vocational difference in serving a broad diversity of neighbors—including those who feel their voices are not properly heard in the political process (a concern in identity politics).

Outline of Chapters

The outline of the dissertation is driven by two questions: First, how has the current trend toward identity politics impacted the American Christian's relationship with and political engagement in the state? Second, how does a confessional Lutheran approach diagnose and reform that relationship by offering a constructive vision of political engagement that addresses the challenge of identity politics? I deal with these two questions in the three main chapters of this dissertation.

Following this introduction, the second chapter deals with identity politics as a *political*

problem. The chapter will accomplish three goals. The first goal is to define "identity politics," and understand the way it functions in American political life. Second, I will propose four categories of analysis that will serve as a lens to help us understand how a person makes the move from core convictions and identity to political engagement in identity politics. The lens comprises four elements, namely, core convictions, identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state. This lens will be used throughout the dissertation to analyze various forms of political engagement. The final goal of this chapter is to demonstrate why identity politics should also be a concern for Lutheran Christians.

The third chapter deals with identity politics as a *theological* problem. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how various models of the church's engagement with the state, as described by James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World*, relate to the challenge of identity politics. Using the interpretative lens of my four categories introduced in chapter two, I will argue that these models arise from differing core convictions, views of identity, ways of relating to fellow humans, and political goals for the state, and, moreover, will explain how in each model core convictions shape various forms of participation in politics. I will show how some of these models can be co-opted into forms of identity politics, noting a gap in their proposals for addressing the problem. Finally, to set up the next chapter, a brief reflection at the end on D. G. Hart's perspective on confessionalist churches will suggest that the Lutheran tradition offers a more adequate approach for political engagement grounded in Christian identity than the ones reviewed in this chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I will offer a *Lutheran* theological account of political identity and engagement in response to the challenge of identity politics. After examining the work of Robert Benne, Joel Biermann, and Leopoldo Sánchez, I will argue that the Lutheran theological tradition

has building blocks that can properly inform political identity and engagement in a way that avoids the negative side of identity politics. Further, I will demonstrate that these building blocks present an opportunity for Lutherans to take seriously the legitimate concerns of suffering neighbors who have felt the need to engage the state through identity politics, thus advocating for God's justice on their behalf within the context of our vocations. In this way, the Lutheran advocates for the right functioning of God's world in his two realms and through vocation.

In my conclusion, I will commend the Lutheran framework as a viable contribution to political identity and engagement that both avoids the fragmentation fostered by identity politics in America today and accounts for the care of neighbors who feel the need to turn to identity politics. I will also consider potential objections to my work and point to areas for further study. Finally, I will reiterate the primary outcome and value of the dissertation, namely, that Lutherans become critically informed about the challenges presented to the church by identity politics today, and be better prepared to faithfully address such challenges constructively through the lens of a theological identity grounded in the Lutheran teaching of God's rule in his two realms and through vocations.

CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY POLITICS AS A POLITICAL PROBLEM

For Christians, identity is everything, or at least it should be everything. Saint Paul writes to the Galatians:

> [b]ut when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4:4–6)[1]

For the Christian, identity as a baptized child of God in whom the Holy Spirit resides is paramount. Thus when a Christian is asked, "Who are you?" it is proper for him to begin his answer by rephrasing the question as "to whom do you belong?" Belonging to God as sons (or daughters), being found in Jesus, and living as temples of the Holy Spirit forms our Christian identity, and therefore our engagement with the world. Further, our identity as creatures among fellow creatures of God moves our eyes to see the needs of our neighbors, and our call from God our Father to love the neighbor.

As Americans, we live in a culture that is obsessed with identity. As part of that, American political life has become both all-consuming and highly personal based on an individual's chosen or ascribed identifications. Richard John Neuhaus recognized this fact, and notes that "*identity* has become something of a buzz word in our public discussions, leading to the frequently deplored 'identity politics' that constructs the world around race, gender, sexual orientation, and other contingencies that should not be expected to bear the weight of the world, or even the weight of defining who you are."[2] As Neuhaus states, identity politics is frequently deplored and

[1] All Scripture from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

[2] Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 28.

does present political and theological challenges, but the reality of its existence and perseverance in our culture requires us not to dismiss it out of hand, but rather to understand its attractiveness, recognize the crucial concerns it raises, and faithfully respond to identity politics from the point of view of a Christian identity. This dissertation does just that. I argue that the Lutheran teaching of God's rule in creation in his two realms and through vocations in service to neighbors offers a critical lens to evaluate the challenge of identity politics as it functions in America today. Moreover, the dissertation argues for a positive constructive approach to political identity and engagement grounded in the Lutheran teaching in a world of identity politics.

In this chapter, I will lay the groundwork that will inform the rest of this dissertation. While the question of the political reasons for the turn to identity politics is certainly interesting, that is not the goal of this work. However, by listening to the discussion concerning the political reasons for the turn we are able to gain insight into the concerns raised by this turn, and these insights will give opportunity for theological reflection. Further, by placing the turn to identity politics into a proper historical context both in the United States and in the greater scope of Western culture, we will be able to understand how identity politics functions, thus preparing us to caution against a wholesale adoption of identity politics, while also highlighting the important concerns raised by the turn to identity politics. To that end, this chapter will proceed in three sections: defining identity politics, offering four categories as a theological lens through which we can examine identity politics, and finally arguing that the turn to identity politics is a Lutheran concern, both positively in presenting an opportunity for service to marginalized neighbors, and negatively when identity politics is uncritically embraced by the church.

Identity politics of the kind engaged in today, which fractures people into smaller and smaller "identities," is a relatively new phenomenon on the American political scene. As such, it

is also difficult to pin down one particular definition that everyone agrees correctly represents 'identity politics.' To that end, the first job of this chapter will be to offer a definition, and from there look at the ramifications both positive and negative that this new method of political engagement produces. When I use the phrase "political engagement" in this context, I am thinking primarily of overtly political expressions such as voting and advocacy made in the form of overtures to politicians for some particular policy. However, more broadly, "political engagement" can also apply to any number of activities that one undertakes as a citizen or resident of the polis one inhabits. Some of these activities will be common things everyone must do, such as paying taxes. Other activities will be optional, such as choosing to engage in political discourse. For Christians, proper engagement may mean serving on the school board for the school district or joining the military, or simply making sure he separates the recycling and garbage according to the local laws. For the pastor, this means preaching or teaching about current events and public policy, not as the primary point of the message, but as important penultimate points that promote Christian living. Of course, this also happens in the home, as a father and mother teach basic civic lessons to their children. Again, however, for the context of this paper, I am thinking primarily of the specific and overtly political activities, while recognizing that those activities will have a trickle down impact on all areas of the Christian's political life. As is readily apparent from the title of this chapter, I will argue that identity politics is a political problem that should concern all Americans, not just Christians. Indeed, criticism of identity politics comes from both the political left and right, and some of their critiques are actually quite aligned with one another. From this vantage point, we will note two things: (1) identity politics is attractive because it can generate significant attention for groups who otherwise may feel neglected in the political discourse of the nation, (i.e., a large political party

may pander to the group in order to get their votes, and in the process promise legislation aimed at giving them what they desire) and (2) identity politics has negative consequences on political engagement which need to be admitted and dealt with, especially for Christians as they seek to faithfully engage life in the state.

After defining and examining the effects of identity politics on political engagement, I will offer a lens through which I will evaluate identity politics as it functions in the United States, based upon an understanding of the relationship between four categories which help one consider political engagement: core convictions, identity, relationship to neighbor/others, and goals for the state. I will demonstrate the usefulness of these four categories for considering political engagement by demonstrating how this lens accounts for various critiques of identity politics. This fourfold lens will also serve as the primary tool for evaluating a variety of approaches to political engagement throughout the rest of my dissertation.

The final section of this chapter will begin to ground my evaluation of identity politics in the framework of Lutheran theology. Identity politics is often correlated with group identity such as ethnicity or sexuality, and less often with groups such as specific church bodies, especially church bodies which are less politically vocal and influential. Therefore, a relationship between the LCMS and identity politics may seem unlikely because of our relatively low profile, not to mention the misunderstanding of Lutheran theology that often promotes a level of quietism. However, the members of LCMS churches are still susceptible to the lure of identity politics because of the prevalence and attractiveness of identity politics in the context of the changing religious and political realities of the United States. I argue that framing political engagement through identity politics is ultimately inadequate for Lutheran Christians. Reasons for arguing against this kind of engagement are many, but for now I offer three reasons for Lutherans to

avoid a wholesale identity politics-driven engagement of life in the state: first, this sort of engagement presents a theological problem; second, it presents an identity problem; and finally, we have a much more compelling, and I argue much needed, theological account to offer Christians (especially, Lutherans) in the United States for engaging issues raised by identity politics.

Defining Identity Politics

Before working to define identity politics, it is necessary to note two overarching and related themes that will appear throughout the work. The reader will note that the concept of a "shared vision" is crucial in political theory, and many of the authors I interact with will take for granted that a vision shared by a majority of the population is both a goal and possibility. The alternative to a shared vision would be a diverse vision, wherein each actor or group maintains principles and elements of their vision which are not shared, nor able to be shared, by a majority. The other theme to be kept in tension is the concept of self in politics, specifically as it plays out in either self-sacrifice or self-interest in political engagement. Whether individuals or groups strive for their rights or whether they lay down their desires can determine the attractiveness of identity politics for them. The relation of these two themes can be seen in the following diagram.

Figure 1 Identity Politics Dynamics Chart

	Shared Vision	Diverse Vision
Self-Sacrifice	**Self-Sacrifice/Shared Vision**	**Self-Sacrifice/Diverse Visions**
Self-Interest	**Self-Interest/Shared Vision**	**Self-Interest/Diverse Visions**

A common criticism leveled at identity politics is that it fosters self-interest/diverse visions (bottom-right quadrant). Such criticism tends to frame the discussion in terms of the need for

self-sacrifice/shared vision (top-left quadrant) as the solution to identity politics in the form of self-interest/diverse visions (bottom-right quadrant). In this framework, there is an expectation that the United States is capable of achieving a shared vision through self-sacrifice, and an assumption that by contrast identity politics prioritizes self-interest which leads to diverse visions. Such critique of identity politics is found in Mark Lilla's popular work, *The Once and Future Liberal*, and in this dissertation I will interact primarily with this critique of identity politics. However, it is also true that identity politics can function in such a way that people advocating in their own self-interest can seek to have their voices heard within a shared vision for America, and perhaps rightly point out where that shared vision is not accounting for their needs (bottom left quadrant). This scenario shows how identity politics could yield a positive result, driving society to a vision with more shared elements, at least from a secular perspective.

Finally, the self-sacrifice/diverse visions (top-right quadrant) should be of special interest to the church because she is called to live sacrificially on behalf of neighbors, but also operates from her own theological core convictions (or we might say, vision). In reality, as I will argue throughout the dissertation, the ability to construct a fully shared vision for America is neither the goal of the church, nor is it likely to happen among sinful creatures. But the church is called to live in the world according to her own unique theological vision of reality grounded in God's story. This does not mean, however, that the church operates on her own behalf; in fact, quite the opposite is true. The church, following her Lord, is to be self-sacrificial, and, as I will finally argue, that includes recognizing the legitimate concerns of neighbors. Such concerns are highlighted in identity politics as issues where justice is lacking, and where the church can advocate on behalf of neighbors in need. Keeping the dynamics of the above chart in mind helps us to locate our critique of and response to identity politics among a variety of options and

concerns.

What is identity politics? On the surface, it is quite easy to define, and indeed a quick visit to Google provides us with a simple definition from Oxford Languages in which we learn that identity politics is, "a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics."[3] An interesting aspect that this definition points out to us is the idea of "exclusive" political alliances. In identity politics, as we will see, core convictions of society are replaced by the particular agenda of each group. At times, various groups may work together, but these moments are always only temporary, and based upon having similar concerns, rather than having a particular cohesive vision for society at large. The concept of broad-based party politics is also worthy of some unpacking. In America, we are used to the two-party system, which has dominated most of our elections and established our grounds for political debate especially in modern times. While each party has its own particular goals, it is assumed that there are certain convictions they hold in common, such as the commitment to freedom, liberty, justice and so on. However, this assumption is frequently wrong in two ways. First, the idea that the two parties actually hold common core convictions is illusory at best. Second, the exacerbated differences in the parties tend toward polarization which then leaves many people or groups feeling as if their voice and concerns are unheard, thus making a turn to identity politics inviting. In our two-party experience, we have basically two options presented to us on every issue, typically neither of which is wholly satisfying. Positively, this system establishes some level of political rules, and offers two distinct visions on most topics. Negatively, broad-based engagement is by nature

[3] This is the top result when a search is done for the phrase "Identity Politics" on Google, https://www.google.com/search?q=identity+politics, March 30, 2021.

imperfect, does not serve everyone, and alternative views are seldom heard, thus potentially tempting people to turn to identity politics. So identity politics is a moving away from broad-based political engagement toward political engagement based on particular identities, but this much is probably clear from the phrase "identity politics" itself. However, identity politics is not as simple as the above definition would lead us to believe.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides a much more complex analysis of identity politics. Cressida Heyes, the author of the article, places the beginning of the recognition and criticism of identity politics in the later part of twentieth century. She argues that the movements which started coalescing around identity were large-scale ones, such as "second wave feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., gay and lesbian liberation, and the American Indian movements."[4] Further, these groups shared in common the claim that they had been the victims of injustice. Because of the injustices perceived, the "social movements are undergirded by and foster a philosophical body of literature that takes up questions about the nature, origin and futures of the identities being defended."[5] The position of feeling that their particular people group has been victimized in the political arena leads to political organizing that "is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed,"[6] and recommends "the reclaiming, redescription, or formation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership."[7] Noting that the "scope of political movements that may be described as identity politics is broad," and therefore "there is no straightforward criterion that makes a political struggle into an example," identity politics "signifies a loose collection of political projects, each undertaken by

[4] Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Fall 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/.

[5] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[6] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[7] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

representatives of a collective with a distinctively different social location that has hitherto been neglected, erased, or suppressed."[8] In Heyes's definition, we are able to understand the attractiveness of identity politics, as it is a method whereby those who feel oppressed are able to coalesce around goals and objectives that are meaningful to them and others like them, and to collectively appeal for rights or justice which they have not yet perceived as being theirs. So engagement in identity politics begins when individuals organize their political activities around a shared particular identity, with which they appeal to those in power to redress various grievances. Thus, Heyes's definition in full:

> Identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one's identity as a woman or as African American, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness (Young 1990). Identity politics starts from analyses of such forms of social injustice to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, one transforms one's own sense of self and community.[9]

For groups who believe that they have little or no power or representation in the government, identity politics offers the opportunity to have their collective voice heard, and is in this way quite attractive. Finally, those who defend and challenge identity politics "agree that the notion of *identity* has become indispensable to contemporary political discourse, at the same time as they concur that it has troubling implications for models of the self, political inclusiveness, and our possibilities for solidarity and resistance."[10]

The concept of identity is the location of two of the more serious charges that Heyes

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[8] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[9] Heyes, "Identity Politics." The reference to "Young 1990" in the text is noting the following: Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[10] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

recognizes as routinely brought against identity politics. On the one hand, a person fractured by the turn to identity politics may see herself as composed of multiple political identities (e.g., female, Christian, immigrant), and will need to determine which identities she will engage with, and when push comes to shove which identity will prevail. This raises and seeks an answer to the question, "who am I?" On the other hand, the narrowing of a person to various identities which he does not share with the rest of the citizenry may result in that person and his neighbors sharing less in common than is necessary for shared citizenship. Shared citizenship requires there to be certain agreed upon principles which establish the rules of our life together. Things like language and customs, but also monetary systems and borders. Arguably, the more principles which are held in common, the stronger the bond of citizenship. Keeping in mind the chart introduced above, it is possible that political engagement informed by self-interest could lead away from a shared vision. It is also possible, however, that a turn to identity politics could result in self-interest leading to a greater shared vision. Either way, a more fundamental question is whether in the end political engagement furthers justice or hastens injustice for neighbors. As we will see later in the dissertation, a response to identity politics must account in some way for the legitimate needs of neighbors, including those from different identity groups. It is possible, for instance, that people with few similarities may inhabit the same space, and in that instance, it becomes less likely that one would identify with his neighbor in any meaningful way, let alone serve him whether out of self-interest or sacrificially. Indeed, a common critique of identity politics among social critics and political pundits posits that group identity can get in the way of a shared political vision. A Lutheran response to identity politics will not provide such a common political vision. Instead, it will provide an approach for responsible Christian living in God's two realms, including the exercise of vocation as a citizen or resident to promote a right

functioning of the state so that neighbors are properly accounted for. Such response does not flow from, depend on, or promote a shared political vision for America. And that by design, as quite often serious Christians will be rejected because of their divisive faith, as their Lord told them they would be.

The first challenge of identity politics is leveled by critics committed to the study of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework in which various aspects of one's identity are arranged in sort of a Venn diagram in order to argue for various lenses through which one may perceive the world. According to this theory, the various aspects of one's identity result in the amount of, and ways in which, one experiences privilege or discrimination. As such, intersectionality challenges identity politics as it divides a person based on their various identities.

> The most often discussed (and criticized) second wave feminist icons—women such as Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem—are white, middle-class, and heterosexual, although this historical picture itself too often neglects the contributions of lesbian feminists, feminists of color, and working-class feminists, which were less visible in popular culture, perhaps, but equally influential in the lives of women. For some early radical feminists, women's oppression *as women* was the core of identity politics and should not be diluted with other identity issues. For example, Shulamith Firestone, in her classic book *The Dialectic of Sex*, argued that "*racism is sexism extended*," and that the Black Power movement represented only sexist cooptation of Black women into a new kind of subservience to Black men. Thus for Black women to fight racism (especially among white women) was to divide the feminist movement, which properly focused on challenging patriarchy, understood as struggle between men and women, the foundational dynamic of all oppressions.[11]

The citation illustrates that, in prioritizing identity, there can be internal conflicts that a person will need to wrestle with when she engages the state. For a Black woman, which identity has been more victimized, being Black, or being a woman? From which identity does she primarily engage? Given the choice between a Black man and a white woman, whom would she vote for?

[11] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

While this challenge is not unique to identity politics it is more pronounced when one's identities are relied upon to determine the terms of engagement.

The second critique that Heyes highlights is the challenge brought by poststructuralists. Where the intersectionality critique dealt with a challenge to defining identity, this critique causes us to question what is and is not—indeed, what can and cannot be held as—common core convictions. By core convictions, I mean the stories, values, understandings, definitions and the like which are able to establish the rules of engagement for citizens of a community. As Americans, this entails theoretical concepts such as the Constitution, laws, and commitments to concepts and ideals such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but also lived experiences such as winning two World Wars, eating Thanksgiving dinner with family while watching football, and celebrating rites of passage such as graduations. Poststructuralists allege that by mistakenly assuming a "*metaphysics of substance*—that is, that a cohesive, self-identical subject is ontologically (if not actually) prior to any form of social injustice,"[12] identity politics reifies people into categories defined by "core essential attributes," which in turn perpetuates the very oppressive hierarchy that it claims to fight against.

> This subject has certain core essential attributes that define her or his identity, over which are imposed forms of socialization that cause her or him to internalize other nonessential attributes. This position, they suggest, misrepresents both the ontology of identity and its political significance. The alternative view offered by poststructuralists is that the subject is itself always already a product of discourse, which represents both the condition of possibility for a certain subject-position and a constraint on what forms of self-making individuals may engage in. There is no real identity—individual or group-based—that is separable from its conditions of possibility, and any political appeal to identity formations must engage with the paradox of acting from the very subject-positions it must also oppose.[13]

[12] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[13] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

According to post-structuralists then, engagement in identity politics is futile because it depends on one defining himself in essentialist terms leveled by the one in power over him while at the same time seeking to oppose such terms. For post-structuralists, allowing one's identity to be defined by another is to remain in bondage to those in power, and in the event that those in power do not share core convictions, or terms of engagement for life, with those who are harmed by the structure, that harm can lead to further marginalization. Moreover, according to post-structuralism, an identity defined as an alternative to the one holding power also conveys inferiority, putting the alternative identity at an automatic disadvantage. For instance, focus on race as an essentialist core value in politics may lead to a Black man feeling like his needs are not met if he fails to conform to the expectations of a white President. Whether the expectations the white President holds or the perceived needs of the Black man are legitimate fails to be debated as soon as identity (in this case, race) becomes the motivating force in politics. The system of marginalization is perpetuated as a group feels disenfranchised from the political system, whether from the overt or perceived imposition of those in power. Thus identity politics at first becomes attractive as a way in which groups may seek to define themselves, appeal for rights, and eventually attain political power. As this happens, however, the identity group can be essentialized by those in power, in such a way that the normative social constructs leading to change on their behalf may actually silence the deeper concerns of the weaker group. It is possible, however, that over time the constructs themselves may be redefined as the needs of the identity group are recognized as legitimate by broader sectors of society—a possibility that even critics of identity politics acknowledge.

In addition to the aforementioned two criticisms leveled against identity politics, Heyes also deals with the challenge of *ressentiment* in which identity politics seems to be rooted. The

term *ressentiment* comes from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and Heyes defines it as "the moralizing revenge of the powerless."[14] Heyes suggests that the charge of *ressentiment* is often leveled by critics of identity politics in a way that is dismissive of the legitimate feelings an identity group has; thus she writes that "the common charge that identity politics promotes a victim mentality is often made glibly."[15] Though the charge may often be made insincerely, Heyes does note that there is some legitimacy to the critique because *ressentiment* functions as a tool in the hands of the powerless. The question raised is whether identity politics, engaged in with the motivation of *ressentiment* can offer a path forward in solidarity, specifically because of its dependance on the structures that surround it.

> The challenge that identity politics retains attachments to hierarchized categories defined in opposition to each other and over-identifies with artifactual wounds has been met with more discussion of the temporality of identity politics: can an identification be premised on a forward-looking solidarity rather than a *ressentiment*-laden exclusion?[16]

The ability of *ressentiment*-based identity politics to highlight injustice is not something to be ignored, but resulting engagement does not seem to promote a productive "forward-looking solidarity" either—indeed *ressentiment* presupposes conflict. The role of *ressentiment* in identity politics is crucial, and will be discussed more in engagement with James Davison Hunter later in this chapter.

The presence of conflicts alone is not uniquely problematic to identity politics; indeed, politics is always full of conflict, but the fact that identity politics is arguably predicated on conflicts between groups (and perhaps even within the individual) demonstrates the wisdom that Neuhaus was on to when recognizing that certain identities should not be expected to bear the

[14] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[15] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[16] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

weight of forming our political engagement. However, these objections noted by Heyes are particularly concerning because they anticipate and amplify the problem of disunity. For those for whom the status quo seems to be working, or those closer to power, changes to the system may be confusing, disturbing, or demoralizing, and thus actively avoided. For those for whom it does not, the reality they live in can be confusing, disturbing, or demoralizing, and thus change is actively pursued. When people are reduced to different identities, their deeper relationship to one another as neighbors is arguably neglected and ultimately damaged, regardless of how much else they may have in common politically. The key problem here is not identity per se, but reducing such identity to one category (particularly, a political one). In such a situation, rather than being able to view the person as his neighbor or even as a fellow human, he views her entirely through the lens of one particular identity, thus missing the full complexity of the person. For the Christian, this reductionism of the person to one identity for political ends is ultimately problematic. Rather than rightly seeing the neighbor as a fellow creature of God in the context of her diversity of cultures, relationships, and experiences, the version of identity politics under criticism can diminish a person to a single aspect of his fuller personhood and finally label him as a political ally or opponent. This move is thus both a political and theological problem.

Here we are able to see the first concern raised by critics of identity politics, and also perhaps in the American political experiment: when politics is about exacerbating what is *different* rather than collaborating with one another based on what is *shared*, the resulting attempts at governing often fail to serve the polis as a whole. We say "often" because identity politics could also arguably work towards stronger proximate justice for all in the state by addressing the injustices of diverse groups in society who are wronged. Either way, the failure of human models of self-government for advancing the common good should not be surprising to

the Christian, nor is this failure crucial for the way the Christian conceives theologically the state. Arguably yet somewhat realistically, the goal of the state is ultimately self-preservation in the here and now. The state does not have its eyes focused on the guarantee of eternal life in Christ in a fully restored creation. Instead, the state seeks to provide a number of temporal, or one may say penultimate, ends (such as proximate justice) for all who depend on it, and it always does so imperfectly. While the Christian recognizes the role of the state in God's temporal realm, her mission does not consist in achieving a shared vision for the common good in the state. Indeed, the Christian may share most, some, or very few of the same penultimate goals the state advocates, depending on how aligned the goals of the state are to the goals God has set forth for it in the temporal realm. In the process, Christians are able to recognize this important theological truth: Christian identity under God's two realms provides a God-given binding structure for the Christian's entire life, and that binding structure includes God's purposes for the state, whether the state recognizes it or not. Thus the Christian will prioritize the things of God rather than the things of man, because Christian identity encompasses the entire person and world, rather than existing as one of many alternatives within creation. So for Christians, there is a true binding structure, God's reigning in his two realms, and though the state and her citizens or residents fail to recognize it, that does not make God's rule any less real or effective.

In the eyes of some critics, the tendency in identity politics today to define a person solely in terms of his group identity makes a shared vision for a binding structure for America unlikely if not impossible. What replaces that shared structure is an important topic of conversation among those who critique identity politics; however, it is not important for the church because the church has a different outlook. The Christian considers instead that which is the ultimate story above all else, the one God calls the Christian into through faith. I will ultimately argue that

the promise of the Christian story is twofold: first, Christians should operate within their own story formed by Scripture; and second, that the story of Scripture encapsulates the totality of God's creation. Thus the Christian story is one for all creatures which, when faithfully lived out, drives the Christian back to the Christian understanding of reality, rather than a political understanding of reality (such as a shared vision for America). In terms of the identity politics chart introduced earlier, the church's concern for engaging neighbors sacrificially from her own vantage point fits in the top-right quadrant. Here the question of whether identity politics is capable of offering a shared political vision or not is not the church's main concern. The church is not concerned with offering such a shared political vision, but with engaging neighbors from her own theological story. Furthermore, some forms of identity politics may, as some critics believe, flow from self-interest that leads to division; in other cases, such self-interest might perhaps be justified and even lead to self-sacrifice for neighbors in one's group or other groups who share similar experiences of injustice. Regardless of the motivations that drive identity politics, the church is not to be ultimately concerned with advancing her own self-interest through political means. Instead, she embodies a self-sacrificial life by listening to the cries of neighbors and seeking their wellbeing regardless of what others may think of her.

Church members can do this through their own God-given vocations. Through her own Christlike life acting through her members' vocations, the church advocates concretely for justice, which may or may not be in line with the popular cries for justice of the day or with the neglect of justice for neighbors in need. By recognizing legitimate concerns of her fellow citizens and residents of the state (a key issue raised by identity politics) and advocating for appropriate policy on their behalf out of her own theological convictions, the church rightly engages the state on issues raised by identity politics. The church does so humbly, using any

influence she might have on behalf of the other, and operating always in a self-sacrificial manner. Therefore, my thesis will explore the impact this Christian disposition to ground identity in God's story of his dealings with creation will have on the Christian's political engagement in a world shaped by identity politics, and how Christians may rightly and constructively respond to the challenges it raises. For the Christian, the understanding of our identity being *extra nos*, that is, coming from outside of us rather than being discovered inside of the individual, is a necessary distinction to retain. Christians hold that identity is formed not by particular pieces of the person, but rather that it begins with our relationship to God. I will argue that this identity is capable of bearing the weight of forming all our engagement in the world, including political engagement.

In order to move the conversation forward, I will use the following definition of identity politics. Identity politics is a *ressentiment*-induced engagement with politics whereby the primary motive for interaction is the correcting of perceived wrongs for a particular group united by the particular identity which believes itself to be marginalized. With that definition in mind, we also recall an important question that Heyes asked of identity politics: "can an identification be premised on a forward-looking solidarity rather than a *ressentiment*-laden exclusion?"[17] From Mark Lilla's standpoint in his critique of identity politics, the answer is no.

Critiques of Identity Politics

Immediately after the unexpected election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States, the political left in America began a search to answer their question, "what went wrong?" A political scientist and self-described liberal, Mark Lilla argues that the primary answer to that question is identity politics. Lilla presents a compelling case that identity politics

[17] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

has harmed not only the Democratic party, but also the United States as a whole. In short, Lilla's argument is that "every advance of liberal *identity* consciousness has marked a retreat of liberal *political* consciousness."[18] Writing in *Eurozine,* he defines identity politics as:

> a way of conceiving of and engaging in politics that puts a premium on group identity or personal identity, rather than on one's status as a citizen. It presumes that all political issues must be seen through the 'lens' of identity, as Americans say today. And in its strongest version, it claims that all appeals to citizens as citizens is really an appeal to one identity group against others.[19]

The premium of group identity, to the detriment of the shared citizen focus, that Lilla notes is comparable to the concerns raised by Heyes's critique above. The reference to the "'lens' of identity," reminds us of the variety of ways that Heyes notes one could find himself at competing personal intersections of identity. And finally, the appeal of one group against another reminds us both of the criticism of the poststructuralists and of the possible flourishing of *ressentiment*. Lilla's definition of identity politics is certainly critical, and his criticisms coincide with those leveled by that Heyes.

In *The Once and Future Liberal*, Lilla argues particularly against two important areas of concern raised by this turn to identity politics, both of which were noted as common criticisms by Heyes. Specifically, Lilla laments the lack of a shared vision necessary for a community to work together on political issues, and the politicization of everything in a divisive way. James Davison Hunter, in his book *To Change the World*, also argues that both of those criticisms are valid in the broader scope of American political engagement. After listening to Lilla's critiques, I will engage Hunter's work to demonstrate the similarity of their concerns. As we will see, Hunter also helps us consider the place of, and attraction to, the concept of *ressentiment* in

[18] Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 10.

[19] Mark Lilla, "The Dog that Didn't Bark: The Disappearance of the Citizen," *Eurozine*, August 18, 2017, https://www.eurozine.com/the-dog-that-didnt-bark-the-disappearance-of-the-citizen/.

American politics.

Lack of a Shared Vision

Mark Lilla argues that identity politics is unable to provide a shared vision for all citizens, or residents. This is concerning because the premise of identity politics is that it brings the marginalized to the center, but in Lilla's view, it is unable to fulfill this lofty goal. Perhaps the starkest evidence of this inability can be discovered when Lilla examines the home pages of the two major American political parties:

> the home page of the Republican site prominently features a document titled "Principles for American Renewal," which is a statement of positions on eleven different broad political issues. The list begins with the Constitution ("Our Constitution should be preserved, valued and honored") and ends with immigration ("We need an immigration system that secures our borders, upholds the law, and boosts our economy"). There is no such document to be found on the Democrats' homepage. Instead, when you scroll to the bottom of it you find a list of links titled "People." And each link takes you to a page tailored to appeal to a distinct group and identity: women, Hispanics, "ethnic Americans," the LGBT community, Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders…There are seventeen such groups, and seventeen separate messages. You might think that, by some mistake, you have landed on the website of the Lebanese government—not that of a party with a vision of America's future.[20]

Lilla contends that by attempting to have a message for each group or identity, his party fails to have a singular message or vision for all citizens. Whether these different visions can converge toward a shared vision is an interesting question, and not something Lilla considers in his research. While we acknowledge such possibility, our dissertation ultimately focuses more on the need for the church to engage the polis from her own theological identity regardless of the achievements or lack thereof of identity politics towards a shared political vision.

Lilla builds his case by sketching out the last 90 years or so of American political history as

[20] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 11–12.

being a tale of two visions, or as he calls them, dispensations. The first began with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and was a time where the Democratic party was successful in promoting a singular unifying vision to Americans. The second began in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan, and Lilla argues this destroyed the progress made under the Roosevelt Dispensation because Reagan's contribution was a turn to American individualism. As Lilla describes it,

> [T]he Roosevelt Dispensation pictured an America where citizens were involved in a collective enterprise to guard one another against risk, hardship, and the denial of fundamental rights. Its watchwords were solidarity, opportunity and public duty. The Reagan Dispensation pictured a more individualistic America where families and small communities and businesses would flourish once freed form the shackles of the state. Its watchwords were self-reliance and minimal government.[21]

Lilla concludes that the former was a political movement and the latter anti-political. On this basis, he begins tracing a path from the flaws he sees in the vision offered by Reagan through the modern phenomenon of identity politics, which was starting to appear on the political scene at the same time as the Roosevelt Dispensation was dying out.

Charging that the "politics of identity is nothing new, certainly on the American right,"[22] Lilla argues that the American left now engaged in identity politics as if taking Reagan's message and using it for its own concerns.

> What was astonishing during the Reagan Dispensation was the development of a left-wing version of it that became the de facto creed of two generations of liberal politicians, professors, schoolteachers, journalists, movement activists, and officials of the Democratic Party. This was not a historical accident. For the fascination, and then obsession, with identity did not challenge the fundamental principle of Reaganism. It reinforced that principle: individualism.[23]

[21] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 8.

[22] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 9.

[23] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 9.

So for Lilla, the problem that the American left ran into is that they lost their ability to promote a unified vision for America when they attempted to respond to Reaganism with their own form of identity politics.

In this way, identity politics had become exclusionary rather than inclusive as more groups were identified as marginalized. Lilla notes the change:

> Identity politics on the left was at first about large classes of people—African-Americans, women—seeking to redress major historical wrongs by mobilizing and then working through our political institutions to secure their rights. But by the 1980s it had given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities. The main result has been to turn young people back onto themselves, rather than turning them outward toward the wider world.[24]

Thinking of the definition of identity politics discussed above, grouping large groups together to right historical wrongs, such as African-Americans or women, may lead to a sense of belonging or acceptance, and this may indeed help fulfill the promise of liberalism, that is, the political philosophy based on liberty which has birthed many of our modern Western nations including the United States. Indeed, this concern for redressing perceived historical wrongs is the genesis of identity politics in the definition that Heyes shared above. In the citation above, Lilla himself acknowledges the possibility of a form of identity politics that can operate within and move towards a shared vision—and perhaps, one that is born out not only out of self-interest but sacrifice. The civil and women's rights movements are the main historic examples. Yet he feels this form of identity politics got lost along the way, overtaken by a reductionistic approach to political identity. By following an increasingly narrow and exclusionary political self-definition, and engaging in what Lilla calls the "pseudo-politics of self-regard" (that is, defining identity in a singularly self-interested way), identity politics has lost the power and influence in numbers it

[24] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 9–10.

could otherwise use to foster a unified vision. Yet by seeking to focus on the particular concerns of smaller marginalized groups, identity politics in its embodied bipartisan forms today (for Lilla, particularly in the Democratic party) has lost its vision for the totality of the citizenry. In this way identity has replaced, for Lilla, citizenship, thus leaving Americans with no shared political vision. As Lilla summarizes:

> The most important lesson is this: that for two generations America has been without a political vision of its destiny. There is no conservative one; there is no liberal one. There are just two tired individualistic ideologies intrinsically incapable of discerning the common good and drawing the country together to secure it under present circumstances.[25]

The question of whether such a common political vision is even possible is interesting, and it is important for Christians to consider it in light of their own identity. Lilla, and other liberals, advocate for a government that appeases everyone by providing a common political vision grounded in liberalism. But our American experience has revealed that there are always significant differences, even in a broad-based two-party system. More important, Lutherans recognize the impossibility for people to escape the effects of sin in this present age. Until the Lord reigns in his fullness at the Parousia, we will continue to exist in a state of sin, and in temporal states marked by sin. Working towards achieving a shared vision for the state, while commendable for political observers such as Lilla, does not belong to the mission of the church. However, the church does have much to say to the state about God's right functioning and his desires for sinners who lead fellow sinners. Therefore, the Christian must remember that the concept of a shared vision for America is utterly impossible while sin wages its war. Further, the Christian must make sure that he does not allow any vision of the state (shared or not) to corrupt the Christian story that informs and shapes God's calling for him on earth.

[25] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 99.

There is one more question in Lilla's work that can be revisited. He believes that the Reagan Dispensation is a misapplication of the values of liberalism which destroyed the concept of citizenship in America,[26] and that the American left's response by engaging in more identity politics is similar.[27] Indeed, he argues that the left must "develop a vision of America that emerges authentically out of liberal values yet speaks to every citizen, as a citizen."[28] But is it true that identity politics is simply a misapplication of liberalism, or is it actually to be expected as an end result of this political system itself? Patrick Deneen will argue the latter, and we will examine his work later, specifically in the critique that identity politics results in an improper functioning of the state.

The Politicization of Everything

The second critique Lilla offers deals with identity politics' politicization of everything. Though Lilla does not use this phrase exactly, James Davison Hunter does in making similar observations. For Lilla, the above-mentioned lack of shared vision leads to a narrowing of the public life such that identity is the primary lens through which individuals consider their interaction with the polis. This poses the problem he now raises, namely, that the narrowing of public life to include many different identities results in political battles over things outside of a shared vision which should not be political. This is the politicization of everything. As politics has moved from a focus on broad political vision to what he describes as a narrow, anti-political vision, there has naturally also been a decrease in shared values, citizenship, core convictions, or overarching narratives. Neutral ground has disappeared, and the personalization of politics has

[26] See specifically his account of the shift in American attention where he says: "[c]itizenship dropped out of the picture," Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 66–67.

[27] "Identity is Reaganism for lefties." Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 95.

[28] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 17.

increased. So, for Lilla, while identity politics in the past successfully highlighted the legitimate concerns of African Americans and women, its lack of a compelling shared vision has been its undoing as the identity groups became smaller and more fragmented. In order to illustrate this, Lilla speaks of a "Facebook model of identity," which entails

> the self as a homepage I construct like a personal brand, linked to others through association I can "like" and "unlike" at will. Citizenship, the central concept of democratic politics, is a bond linking all members of a political society over time, regardless of their individual characteristics, giving them both rights and duties. We are generally born with this status, but, through democratic political activity, we can change how it is defined and what it means. In the Facebook model of the self, the bonds that matter to me and that I decide to affirm are not political in this democratic sense. They are mere elective affinities. I can even *self-identify* with a group I don't objectively seem to belong to.[29]

Lilla goes on to use the example of Rachel Dolezal who identified as Black, even claiming to be the victim of hate crimes, and then was revealed by her parents as actually being white. Lilla makes the point that if the Facebook model of identity is correct, her supporters were right to defend her amidst the outrage: "If all identification is legitimately self-identification, there is no reason why this woman could not claim to be anything she imagined herself to be. And to drop that identification the moment it became too burdensome, or just a bore. Whatever."[30]

Lilla goes on to describe the troubling "Facebook model of political engagement" that was inspired by this model of identity, and in so doing he demonstrates how dysfunctional and directionless this political engagement becomes.

> The Facebook model of identity has also inspired a Facebook model of political engagement. During the Roosevelt Dispensation group identity became recognized not only as a legitimate way to mobilize people for political action as citizens, but also as a necessary tool for forcing our political system to fulfill its promise of equal membership. But the Facebook model is all about the self, my very self, not about common histories or the common good or even ideas. Young people on the left—in contrast with those on the right—are less likely today to connect their engagements to

[29] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 87–88.

[30] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 88.

> a set of political ideas. They are much more likely to say that they are engaged in politics as an X, concerned about other Xs and those issues touching on X-ness. They may have some sympathy for and recognize the strategic need to build alliances with Ys and Zs. But since everyone's identity is fluid and has multiple dimensions, each deserving of recognition, alliances will never be more than marriages of convenience.[31]

For Lilla, the turn from party politics, and along with it a shared concept of political goals, to identity politics among the left has produced smaller immediate political expectations, rather than being interested in the larger story of American political life past, present, and future.

Further, this approach has prevented dialogue and debate among people as they engage the polis. Since this problem is seen at colleges and universities, Lilla is concerned that there may be an entire generation, or more, of adults who find themselves unable to articulate a liberal view of the future of America: "The more obsessed with personal identity campus liberals become, the less willing they become to engage in reasoned political debate."[32] Being unwilling to engage in debate means that ideas and fellow citizens are taken out of the equation when considering the value of political engagement. The new phrase "[s*]peaking as an X…*tells the listener that I am speaking from a privileged position on this matter."[33] Lilla contends that politicizing identity by making it the center of the political debate is problematic, and an extension of the fact that there is no shared vision:

> And it turns the encounter into a power relation: the winner of the argument will be whoever has invoked the morally superior identity and expressed the most outrage at being questioned. So classroom conversations that once might have begun, *I think A, and here is my argument,* now take the form, *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B.* This makes perfect sense if you believe that identity determines everything. It means that there is no impartial space for dialogue. White men have one "epistemology," black women have another. So what remains to be said?[34]

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[31] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 89.

[32] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

[33] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

[34] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

Lilla's critique of identity-driven engagement is incisive. The further one relies on one's identity alone to determine principles of political engagement, the more all-encompassing that identity must become, or it will ultimately prove incapable of providing coherent direction to broad platforms. For a broad-based political vision, such as the liberal one espoused by Lilla, it is imperative that there is much consensus on a wide range of issues, even if the individual sacrifices portions of his particular desires in the name of the "greater good." This serves the purpose of providing some form of a collective vision for a party or nation. Without agreement on what *should* constitute the goals of the government of the United States, it is hard to imagine how unity *could* be attained. Further, it is hard to picture how government could secure "certain unalienable Rights," or continue to "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed" as the Declaration of Independence reads. Admittedly, at times the turn to identity politics can highlight the need for the righting of an injustice; other times the turn to a particular identity is arguably simply self-serving. Lilla admits the potential for both, even if he thinks only the latter form of identity politics is at work today. From a theological perspective, a more fundamental issue raised by the possibilities of identity politics lies in the conception of the self that drives its motivations. Being able to discern and account for this difference is a challenge in general, yet this challenge is one the church is—as I will argue later in this dissertation—wholly equipped to discern and undertake. The church should make sure, for instance, that she engages the polis in a way that does not reflect the motivations of the world for political engagement. As we noted earlier, she does not engage out of self-interest, but sacrificially out of concern for suffering neighbors.

Thus far Lilla's critique about the lack of a shared vision has a vertical aspect to it, each person looking to that which unites us, but a second critique carries with it a horizontal

dimension dealing with citizens and their place among other fellow humans. In an ideal circumstance, and indeed in a land where government is functioning well, the cares and concerns of my neighbor would also be my cares and concerns. This care would derive from at least two different angles: first, neighbors would share a common view of what the government is to be about; and second, when one sees the particular needs of her neighbor not being met, she would advocate on his behalf. Patience, deference, and the benefit of the doubt would extend to the neighbor, and indeed these are necessary elements of helpful dialogue, and are able to hold groups of people together. According to Lilla's Facebook model, however, "[w]hite men have one "epistemology," black women have another. So what remains to be said?"[35] The short answer is nothing, which places divisions between neighbors, divides communities, and drives political and social strife.

As Lilla describes the politicization of everything via the Facebook model of identity, identity politics proves to be a failed model of political engagement and unable to properly unify or steward a culture, citizenry, or country. Lilla argues that this inability stems from the elevation of identity to the role of broad-based political activity, which provides an inadequate system for responding to the challenges of society as a whole. Moreover, instead of taking the needs of the neighbor seriously, identity politics makes political enemies of neighbors through the politicization of everything. Therefore, in addition to the concerns that Lilla has raised thus far, the church is right to note two other concerns that come from identity politics, namely, the mistreatment of marginalized neighbors resulting from the politicization of everything, and the improperly functioning state. I will explore both of those concerns below, but first it is necessary to look at how Mark Lilla's concerns, expressed from the political left, are mirrored by a more

[35] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

conservative voice in James Davison Hunter.

Hunter and Lilla Share Concerns

Above I demonstrated how Mark Lilla critiqued the lack of shared vision in American politics. For him, this is especially clear when considering the two political dispensations that he spelled out, namely the Roosevelt Dispensation and the Reagan Dispensation. Because of the rise in identity politics, Lilla argued

> that for two generations America has been without a *political* vision of its destiny. There is no conservative one; there is no liberal one. There are just two tired individualistic ideologies intrinsically incapable of discerning the common good and drawing the country together to secure it under present circumstances.[36]

James Davison Hunter takes a different route to the same conclusion regarding the lack of a shared vision, and he begins by challenging the assumptions of what he calls the common view of culture and how it is changed. It is important to note that Hunter writes to and about Christians, and their engagement with culture. As such, his approach speaks to a group which, according to identity politics, should feel as if it has been well represented, and certainly has contributed much to the vision of American life and politics. Thus, Hunter describes what he calls the common view of cultural change for a Christian: "If you have the courage and hold to the right values and if you think Christianly with an adequate Christian worldview, you too can change the world."[37] To use a familiar political phrase, be the change you want to see. The problem, according to Hunter, is that this common view "is almost wholly mistaken."[38]

Hunter goes on to critique this theory because culture does not operate according to the

[36] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 99.

[37] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

[38] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 17.

expectations or standards of the majority, thus the alternative worldviews held by various minorities are actually every bit as, if not more, likely to change culture than the majority groups. He cites the examples of the Jewish community in America and the gay community as instances where culture is influenced in a way disproportionate to their size. For instance, he notes that "most of the gains in visibility, legitimacy, and legal rights by the gay rights movement were made during the twelve conservative years of the Reagan and Bush presidencies."[39] The result was "the rapid transformation of gay marriage from an almost unthinkable hypothetical for most Americans to the subject of a raging debate at the center of American public and political life,"[40] which by 2010 at least in mainstream American media left little or no space for voicing questions of moral and social concerns about this movement. Homosexuality has become a fact of our collective life and social reality such that the only legitimate question is how we are to learn to live with it.[41] Continuing his argument, he offers the examples of the teaching of evolution in American schools and the laws regarding abortion as "evidence that culture is in fact a much more complicated phenomenon than we normally imagine. Indeed, it often seems eerily independent of majority opinion."[42]

Hunter provides eleven theses to frame his work.[43] The first seven deal with culture, and the final four with cultural change. Looking at these four helps us understand why culture, even in a democracy, is resistant to majority opinion. First, Hunter proposes instead that culture is changed from the top down, rather than from the bottom up.

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[39] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 20.

[40] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 20.

[41] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 21.

[42] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 22.

[43] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 32–44.

> It is sometimes true that economic revolts (as in labor protests) and social movements (such as environmentalism) occur from the "bottom up"; that is, through the mobilization of ordinary people…Such revolutions, however, nearly always involve leadership from the ranks of marginal and disaffected elites who build new organizations that coalesce revolutionary changes around new state and national identity. Here too their influence can be enormous. Yet the deepest and most enduring forms of *cultural* change nearly always occurs form the "top down." In other words, the work of world-making and world-changing are, by and large, the work of elites: gatekeepers who provide creative direction and management within spheres of social life. Even where the impetus for change draws from popular agitation, it does not gain traction until it is embraced and propagated by elites.[44]

Given this, the working of cultural change goes from theorists to researches to teachers to popularizers, and becomes "most enduring when it penetrates the structure of our imagination, frameworks of knowledge and discussion, the perception of everyday reality."[45] So while it may be true that the majority of our culture believes in God, and may even affirm many Christian statements, alternative worldviews have penetrated the imagination, frameworks, and perceptions of American thought. Identity is often formed by things outside of a biblical worldview; for non-Christian and Christian Americans alike, changes in our culture evidence disparate visions. For Christians, many of these cultural changes, such as gay marriage, evolution, and abortion, are incompatible with a biblical worldview, so what is a Christian to do? The solution has been, and continues to be, suggested that turning to the right political leaders will produce the desired results. While Hunter above argues that change comes from the top down, to assume that electing the correct leaders will change hearts and minds is incorrect because, as he himself will demonstrate in his next theses, change tends not to come from within positions of power, but as a challenge to the dominant ideas and moral systems, such as the once foundational aspects of Christianity. Christians cannot appeal to structures, power, or the right leaders, but must instead

[44] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 41.

[45] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 42.

distinguish itself from the very systems it has been united with for so long, so as to often be indistinguishable.

In his next proposition about cultural change, his ninth overall in the series, he argues that change comes from those who can successfully challenge the status quo, not those who hold the seats of power: "Wherever innovation begins, it comes as a challenge to the dominant ideas and moral systems defined by the elites who possess the highest levels of symbolic capital."[46] For Christians, who for generations held the highest level of symbolic capital, these changes are hard to accept. Further, any attempt to argue for a biblical worldview is challenged because change "calls into question the rightness and legitimacy of the established ideas and practices of the culture's leading gatekeepers."[47] Hunter's next proposition is an extension of this one, in which he argues that the more overlap there is between the elites and their institutions, the more concentrated the cultural change that follows. Finally, in proposition eleven he notes the reality of a fight over the changing of cultures. This is natural and expected: "By its very nature, culture is a realm in which institutions and their agents seek to defend one understanding of the world against alternatives, which are always either present or latent."[48] In a world that has actors trying constantly to transform the world into their preferred image this is problematic. Identity politics rightly highlights the misuse of power which results in neglected neighbors, who in turn need to cry out for help. In tension with this lofty goal, some forms of identity politics can also lead to engagement that is intentionally or unintentionally driven by self-interest in a way that becomes divisive. It is important that the church recognize both of these iterations of identity politics, especially as she considers her own motivation for engagement in the world. The church must

[46] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 42.

[47] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 43.

[48] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 43.

care for the marginalized, properly advocating for them with whatever political capital she has, but at the same time must guard against seeking only her own self-interest in the process, lest she becomes one more institution like others in the world seeking primarily to cause cultural change.

The similarities between Hunter and Lilla are not just about the lack of a shared vision, for they also share the concern about the politicization of everything which has accompanied the disparate visions. Hunter's proposal that culture is changed from the top down tempts Christians to believe that "electing the right political leaders" is sufficient political engagement, as the belief is that Christian leaders would bring about a Christian nation. This is inappropriate politicization on the part of Christians, and wrong according to Hunter as well. Hunter's theses demonstrate that cultural change often comes from outside of the traditional power structures, that is, the margins of society. In this theory, political action does not control or define culture, but rather is influenced by culture and serves as a representation of such. Applied to identity politics, political action thus responds to people united around a political identity as they demand political change in regard to their priorities. This dynamic could be seen at work in groups such as labor rights advocates or environmentalists. A newly recognized identity group could also result as identities are fragmented from one shared primary identity into an unshared and no longer primary identity. For instance, this dynamic could be seen in women's rights in the sense that the identity of women always existed, but the politicization and advocacy for women's rights is more recent. For Lilla, this fragmentation into many identities is ultimately problematic, though it does not necessarily have to be. Highlighting the needs of a group of citizens does not always need to result in politicization, and certainly not of the identity politics kind if there is another group who will care for those in need. Hunter also argues that in order to gain traction, the newly recognized identities need the help of elites, especially those outside of the traditional

power structure of politics, who are able to create new structures in order to make gains in having the concerns of these identity groups addressed. Here the Christian church has the ability to advocate, with whatever political or other power she may have, in behalf of her neighbors.

For those who are marginalized in society, identity politics presents an opportunity to have their voice heard, or to attain some power in the political arena, if they are able to receive the support of those who are able to highlight and advance their concerns. In this light, the movement of the church away from a central role in shaping culture and politics to the margins allows for the adoption of the narrative that the church has been marginalized, which presents two opportunities. On the one hand, the church can, and (as we will see in chapter three) often does, turn to identity politics for its own advocacy. This move would be equivalent to the bottom left or right quadrant on our identity politics chart, depending on whether the church is advocating for a particularly shared vision or not. On the other hand, the church can, and I will argue rightly does, recognize and highlight theologically the needs of marginalized neighbors, thus faithfully engaging on their behalf in a way that Hunter would argue may lead to the change the neighbor truly needs. This move would be equivalent to the top right quadrant of our chart, with the church advocating in a self-sacrificial way for the other, while not letting her unique story be usurped by a particular political vision. The temptation for partisan politicians—those who hold the most power in our culture—to court votes from the marginalized is apparent. When partisan politicians get involved, however, the needs of the truly marginalized may become distorted or politicized. Hunter recognizes this turn to partisan politics, and he argues that this "politicization of everything" creates a world centered around and dependent on the state.

> Politics has become so central in our time that institutions, groups, and ideas are now defined relative to the state, its laws and procedures. Institutions such as popular and higher education, philanthropy, science, the arts, and even the family understand their identity and function according to what the state does or does not permit. Groups

> (women, minorities, gays, Christians, etc.) have validity not only but increasingly through the rights conferred by the state. Issues gain legitimacy only when recognized by law and public policy. It is only logical, then, that problems affecting society are seen increasingly, if not primarily through the prism of the state; that is, in terms of how law, policy, and politics can solve them.[49]

As more and more identities become defined around political issues, the inability to provide a comprehensive accounting of all people becomes clear for the vast majority of our identities. These identities on their own are incapable of bearing the weight of defining a large group of people, such as a nation. Further, our disparate identities can actually put people in opposition to each other, a challenge only exacerbated by partisan politics. Our unshared definitions of words, such as freedom, for instance, puts us at odds as well. It is quite tempting in the face of this lack of shared vision, and after seeing another get ahead by means of identity politics, to embrace the trappings of identity politics for oneself.

> Given this turn, it is hardly surprising that the language of partisan politics has come to shape how we understand others. The identity of public actors is determined to a large degree by their partisan attachments, either real or presumed. This is not only seen in how we tend to label people and their actions and motivations ideologically as conservative, liberal, traditionalist, progressive, feminist, fundamentalist, and the like. Such labels credit or discredit depending on the group one is in or the relationships one has. Even categories of identity that are not in themselves political become suffused with political meaning. This is precisely what happened to the categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Age and disability are evolving in this direction too. It is also seen in how many people understand themselves this way too. Next to their occupation or profession, their commitments as Democrats, or Republicans, pro-lifers or pro-choicers, conservative, liberal, gay, and so on, compete to form the largest part of a person's identity in public.[50]

Hunter concludes that "taken to an extreme, identity becomes so tightly linked with ideology, that partisan commitment becomes a measure of one's moral significance; of whether a person is judged good or bad. This is the face of identity politics."[51] Thus, the horizontal

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[49] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 103.

[50] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 105.

[51] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 105

relationships we have need be based not on identity tightly linked to ideology, but rather on some shared sense of who we are. For the church, this presents an opportunity for faithful engagement: while the church may not wield the power it once did in culture, its message of witnessing to the gospel reality of Christ in the world remains. As this gospel is proclaimed in the church, God provides great spiritual benefit, which restores human persons to the Creator of the world through the forgiveness of sins. As this gospel is embodied in vocations in the world, God also provides temporal benefits to the neighbors we serve—one of which is highlighting the needs of those marginalized in our society, and advocating on their behalf. As Lutheran doctrine argues, the church is as legitimate and necessary as the state in God's ruling of the world. Even when there is a lack of a shared sense of who we are politically or culturally, the Lutheran conviction that we are all equally creatures of the same Creator who rules in his two realms for the benefit of his creation shapes her faithful Lutheran engagement in the world. In the Christian story, all human creatures receive the gifts of God in both realms, both temporally in their bodily needs, and spiritually when they hear the gospel and believe in Jesus.

Earlier on, Cressida Heyes mentioned the aspect of *ressentiment* that is loaded into identity politics. Hunter similarly recognizes this challenge, and spends a good deal of time unpacking all that is involved with that term. He defines *ressentiment* as including the English "resentment, but it also involves a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action. *Ressentiment* is, then, a form of political psychology."[52] This fits well with what Heyes described as the "moralizing revenge of the powerless." Further, Hunter argues that in order to be true *ressentiment,* the engagement must be "grounded in a narrative of injury or, at least,

[52] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 107.

perceived injury; a strong belief that one has been or is being wronged."[53] As such, individuals or groups believe that they have been denied rights, or are seeing their rights taken away by new power holders. Since "perception is everything,"[54] anyone can potentially engage in a politics of *ressentiment*. The linking of identity to ideology, and vice versa, makes for easy foils when partisan politics gets involved. Combining engagement motivated by *ressentiment* and this linking of identity to ideology in partisan politics presents serious challenges to Christians who wish faithfully to engage the state. For instance, political parties do not have the same goals as the church, but Christian identity linked to Republican or Democratic party ideology often blurs or erases this distinction, and in the process theological justification may be sought for non-theological issues. On the other hand, identity with either political party can become so central to the way one thinks that he fails to engage in serious theological reflection, or believes the two should be kept separate.

A little nuance is necessary at this point, and Hunter's own caution provides it:

> I don't want to overstate the case—clearly what I describe here are not fully and comprehensively established realities; all is not power and *ressentiment*. What makes it more complicated (and interesting) is that there are genuinely public-spirited people on all sides of all issues. Indeed most people are not resentment-filled and power hungry. But consistent with my view all along is the fact that the motives of individuals and the structures of culture are not the same thing.[55]

So although important for understanding the appeal to identity politics, it is important to heed the advice and not make everything in identity politics a matter of a power struggle, or the automatic pitting of one group against another. The lack of shared vision and the politicization of everything are not necessary ends of identity politics, but they are possible not very far below the

[53] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

[54] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

[55] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 109.

surface, and have been observed by many as happening in the American experience. These are temptations and ends that have been observed as emerging from identity politics, but they are not the whole story, and perhaps are manipulated by the power hungry for their own ends.

Lilla and Hunter reach a point of divergence in their outlook for the future of politics. Hunter argues that by politicizing everything, "we have come to ascribe impossibly high expectations to politics and political processes."[56] It is especially in the next few pages of his argument that Hunter causes one to speculate whether identity politics is unavoidable in America, and whether the situation we face now can be solved by politics as we know it. In evaluating the politicization of everything, Hunter examines the will to power as an important way for us to understand how the once binding structures (and their associated core convictions) have disappeared, and the lack of replacement for them, which now leaves neighbors at the mercy of more powerful neighbors.

> Democratic ideals, principles, and reasoning provide a framework for making sense of and justifying the bent toward politicization in public life. I assume that this is why few are alarmed by these developments. But let us not lose sight of what is going on here. When one boils it all down, politicization means that the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive power of the state. When politicization is oriented toward furthering the specific interests of the group without an appeal to the common weal, when its means of mobilizing the uncommitted is through fear, and when the pursuit of agendas depends more on the vilification of opponents than on the affirmation of higher ideals, power is stripped to its most elemental forms. Even democratic justifications are not much more than a veneer over a will to power.[57]

He concludes that the "politicization of everything is an indirect measure of the loss of a common culture and, in turn, the competition among factions to dominate others on their own terms."[58]

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[56] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 106.

[57] Hunter, *To Change the world*, 106.

[58] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

On the other hand, Lilla contends that the right political party can do the right things. After his chapters called "Anti-Politics" and "Pseudo-Politics," he begins to lay out his vision for the future of political liberals (here I mean those on the political left in America) and the Democratic party. Recognizing the problem of identity politics among his fellow leftists, he opines:

> In an age when we need to educate young people to think of themselves as citizens with duties toward each other, we encourage them instead to descend into the rabbit hole of the self. The frustrating truth is that we have no political vision to offer the nation, and we are thinking and speaking and acting in ways guaranteed to prevent one from emerging.[59]

So Lilla contends that the need is to offer a political vision. His primary recommendation is that liberals move away from movement or identity-based political activity and renew their focus on legislating, debating, and persuading through argumentation rather than agitation and abdicating the *demos*: "by getting so focused on themselves and the groups they felt they belonged to, identity liberals acquired additional disdain for ordinary democratic politics because it meant engaging with and persuading people unlike themselves."[60] In other words, the prescription that Lilla offers for reimagining a better political engagement for America is more liberalism (in the philosophical sense of the word). But can this work when there is no shared vision?

Lilla's assertion that more liberalism is a cure assumes that there can be a shared vision of the nation with different opinions on the way, and with that in mind Lilla begins to suggest a way beyond the politicization of everything by suggesting that progressive liberals begin to make more use of the word "we," thus denoting both a shared vision, and shared citizenship. What he is doing here should be no surprise—rather than having no shared vision, he is suggesting offering a shared vision to the American people which also assumes commitment to neighbors.

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[59] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 103.

[60] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 112.

> But by abandoning the word (we), identity liberals have landed themselves in a strategic contradiction. When speaking about themselves, they want to assert their difference and react testily to any hint that their particular experience or needs are being erased. But when they call for political action to assist their group *X*, they demand it from people they have defined as *not-X* and whose experiences cannot, they say, be compared with their own.
>
> But if that is the case, why would these others respond? Why should *not-Xers* give a damn about *Xers*, unless they believed they share something with them?[61]

To this point, Lilla is correct in his assessment that there needs to be something shared that extends both vertically, a shared vision, and horizontally, concern for the neighbor. As a final note at this point, it is necessary to acknowledge that Lilla does not stop with raising and diagnosing the challenge of identity politics. Indeed, he proposes a plan for American progressives to begin imagining a better understanding of political engagement. He suggests, for instance, that the focus of politics should ultimately be on institutions, democratic persuasion, and citizenship instead of movement politics, aimless self-expression, and group or personal identity—the latter three characteristics being the focus of identity politics. He writes: "Our common goal must be to put ourselves in a position to develop an inspiring, optimistic vision of what America is and what it can become through liberal political action."[62] Whether liberal political action can support that vision in America, however, is a question that remains. In our next two sections, we will argue that the turn to identity politics is also a theological problem, and in doing so we will begin to answer this question: is the philosophical program of liberalism capable of recovering from identity politics, or is the turn to identity politics a final result of our experience of liberalism in America? This question is of particular importance for Lutherans as they seek to frame their engagement with the state theologically, especially as they consider the

[61] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 120.

[62] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 104

ultimate goals and purpose of the state.

The Mistreatment of the Marginalized Neighbor

Beyond the political concerns about identity politics, namely the lack of shared vision and politicization of everything, there are theological problems which a turn toward identity politics highlights. The first problem deals with the mistreatment of the neighbor, especially the neighbor who finds himself marginalized in society due to various identity factors such as race or immigration status. As we noted above, in an era of identity politics, it is easy to approach political engagement with self-serving questions and expectations, and in the process to ignore or even trample on the neighbor. Combined with the temptation to politicize everything, citizens become wholly unaware of, or callous toward, their neighbors rather than considering their needs. Consider the earlier conversation about the shaping of *ressentiment* by Hunter, and how *ressentiment* only needs the perception of injury to become a political weapon. In this turn, the elevation of the one in need above the ones who are not can create another sense of injury, thus creating political opponents. Out of fear of injury, if a particular identity were to gain political power, the temptation is to marginalize the identity of others, thus reserving power for those newly in power. When one finds himself in power, the arrangement is convenient, when one finds himself marginalized, it is a problem. The lack of empathy is an opportunity for Christians both to advocate on behalf of the neighbor who is not receiving justice from the state, and to demonstrate Christlike love to the same.

As Cressida Heyes noted in her definition, identity politics is especially attractive to people outside of the traditional power structure. Thus, she says that it "signifies a loose collection of political projects, each undertaken by representatives of a collective with a distinctively different

social location that has hitherto been neglected, erased, or suppressed."[63] Thus, in identity politics, marginalized groups associate politically around their particular identity, and appeal to the state for needs of their own, often alone and without necessary support from others and institutions, including the church. Lutheran theologian Leopoldo Sánchez argues that a Christian individual, and indeed the church, should be legitimately concerned about accounting for the voices of unrepresented communities in political life, particularly in the immigration debate. Lutheran theology has the ability to constructively engage these neighbors and their communities in a way that their public and political concerns are not outrightly dismissed by strict adherence to a political platform. He writes: "In the shuffle of identity politics and tribally framed theological responses to complex social issues such as immigration law and reform, an interesting thing takes place: The refugee and immigrant neighbor, her struggles and hopes, becomes invisible."[64]

The needs of neighbor, and our frequent inability to perceive or act upon them, is a concern raised by Lilla, and quite tellingly he notes that the lack of a binding structure, such as a shared religious faith, has helped to produce this: "In the absence of a motivating charitable faith, the only way one can hope to induce a sense of duty is by establishing some sort of identification between the privileged and the disadvantaged."[65] In other words, since the Christian faith which once promoted public needs, charity, and the like no longer holds public say in America, the government and citizens need something else to induce a sense of duty toward neighbor. Expecting individuals or institutions to voluntarily function in a way shaped by Christian ethics is unrealistic.

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[63] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[64] Sánchez, "Beyond Facebook Love," 85.

[65] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 126.

For the Christian church, called by her Lord to "love your neighbor as yourself," ignoring or mistreating the neighbor is inexcusable, and the fact that people have come to do so in public should be alarming and an opportunity for the church to demonstrate its difference, rather than something to be celebrated or commended. In other words, the Christian desires to care for his neighbor, and understands the need for good government to address issues hurting communities. For Christians who understand "good government" as a gift from God, government which is less than effective, less than just, and less than seeking the things of God leaves much to be desired. For the Christian, identity politics can actually have the positive effect of highlighting voices which are otherwise unheard. That is, positively construed, identity politics allows for potentially marginalized or powerless groups to feel their voices are heard and their particular point of view included as part of the conversation. The church has an opportunity to successfully fulfill its responsibility to love the neighbor as self by advocating along with, or in place of, the neighbor, depending on the level of witness the church and individuals may possess.

However, as we shall see later, the church's role in advocacy for neighbors will flow from her theological identity and core convictions. Identity politics may illuminate the problem of marginality, but it is problematic as a solution to it. As we noted above, Sánchez suggests that an identity politics focus does not necessarily lead to the proper care of excluded neighbors. As an example, we might say that immigrant advocates who engage in identity politics in the style that Mark Lilla denounces risks doing harm to the neighbor because of its polarizing tendency in America today. For example, preferential treatment for one group of immigrants over another can further injustice and breed contempt; or worse, political arguments about how to care for the immigrants can make the immigrant neighbors into nothing more than an object to be negotiated over and politized rather than truly cared for. However, when the church rightly examines

whether, and to what extent, a community has been marginalized in church and state, identity politics could highlight a chance for the church to love the immigrant neighbor. For the church, the recognition that a group has been marginalized requires action. For example, the church can advocate before the state on behalf of neighbors, in as much as her response is guided by Christian core convictions. On this point, Sánchez notes that immigrant neighbors call the church beyond either-or propositions on the benefits (liberal) or liabilities (conservative) of immigrants to the country common in our current political climate, which tend to frame a complex issue in utilitarian and not theological terms. Rather than asking how our American identity groups benefit or not from immigrants, the church is called to embody a higher ethic, namely, to channel the love she has received in Christ for the neighbor other "by embodying ways of engaging the refugee and immigrant other through a cruciform ethic of divine love that does not only point out the bad in people but bestows the good on them."[66]

The church affirms the importance of making a place for the vulnerable in politics, or more fundamentally in creation, but rather than turning to the temptation of identity politics, or even viewing things through an American liberal philosophical structure, the church has a different mission and message. For Christians then, there is both an opportunity for reflection raised by identity politics, and a recognition that identity politics itself is not the ultimate solution to the world's problems. Further, in an ordered rendering of the Christian world, all people have validity because they belong to the human family created by God. Thus, the Christian recognizes neighbor as the fellow creation of God, and the fellow object of God's love in Christ. The Christian church, then, provides what belonging is craved for in a divided society or inhospitable world, and does so in a way that provides order and justice, from the world's Creator to its

[66] Sánchez, "Beyond Facebook Love," 86.

created citizens, regardless of their identities.

Improper Functioning of the State

A final critique of the turn to identity politics that is concerning from the church's perspective is the resulting improper functioning of the state. As alluded to above, good government is a gift from God to his creatures. Consider, for instance, the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily bread." In the explanation to the question, "what is meant by daily bread," the Small Catechism says:

> Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.[67]

The inclusion of good government on this list of what constitutes our daily bread makes good government something that the Christian advocates for, and recognizes as a benefit for life. However, as we have seen in the turn to identity politics, the answer to what constitutes good government is elusive.

In Mark Lilla's telling, good government is lost in the turn to identity politics because it fails to allow for a prevailing narrative to bind the government together. For him, however, the principles of liberalism are the highest good, and there is a clear solution: building citizens who embrace the liberal concepts.

> It would not be such a terrible thing to raise another generation of citizens like [the sixties generation]. The old model, with a few tweaks, is worth following: passion and commitment, but also knowledge and argument. Curiosity about the world outside your own head and about people unlike yourself. Care for this country and its citizens, all of them, and a willingness to sacrifice for them. And the ambition to imagine a common future for all of us. Any parent or educator who teaches these things is engaged in political work—the work of building citizens. Only when we

[67] Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 258.

> have citizens can we hope that they will become liberal ones. And only when we have liberal ones can we hope to put the country on a better path.[68]

However, as we saw above, identity politics is an expected outcome of liberalism when a shared binding structure, or core conviction, is lost, and the only thing holding us together is a vague definition of "citizenship" or "liberal ideals" rather than a jointly held and shared understanding of our humanity. When there is no clear definition of who we are, or what the role of government is to be, or what the responsibilities of citizens are, there is nothing binding us together, and political infighting becomes the norm.

Within the church, there has often been a temptation to adopt identity politics as well, and this is a particular challenge that I will deal with in chapter three. However, it is crucial to note at this point that the institutional church has often, on both sides of the political aisle, uncritically adopted American liberalism as a philosophical assumption and drive for political life. In other words, the church and her members have lost a sense of their primary identities, the church as the bride or body of Christ, all people as God's creatures and believers as God's adopted children. Thus, the deeper issue is whether the church in America, including the LCMS, has a clear understanding of its role in the state that follows from a more fundamental theological identity based on appropriate core convictions. In America, partisan politicians who use the tool of identity politics have become most influential in determining political identity. Deneen notes, for instance, that both progressive (politically left-leaning) and conservative (politically right-leaning) interpretations of our liberal politics are so committed to the project of liberalism that neither can lead the way beyond that which is causing the political chaos we see today. He writes,

[68] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 140–41.

> Conservatism rightly observes that progressivism's destination is a dead end, and progressivism rightly decries conservatism's nostalgia for a time that cannot be restored. Conservatives and progressives alike have advanced liberalism's project, and neither as constituted today can provide the new way forward that must be discerned outside our rutted path.[69]

The nostalgia for a past that cannot be restored is a charge that is rightly leveled against Lilla as well as conservatives.

Ultimately in Deneen's telling, the form of government, liberalism, that Lilla esteems so highly is precisely what spawned American identity politics, and thus it is incapable of providing the good government that we need. Lilla and Deneen agree that the results of identity politics are problematic, but when it comes to whether liberalism is redeemable in itself, Deneen's case that it is not, at least in our context, seems much more convincing than Lilla's appeal that we just need to go back to what has already failed. Following Deneen, we need to look outside of liberalism itself to find good government.

There is one more piece to the puzzle of the improper functioning of the state identified by identity politics and wrought by liberalism, and that issue helps to put all of our pieces together: the fact that we live today in an age of what James C. Edwards calls "normal nihilism." In the narrative that Edwards sketches we recognize the destruction of shared core convictions, or binding structures, which could indeed serve to hold people with differences together.

> Our "highest values" compete with the "highest values" of others on what is, looked at philosophically, a perfectly level field of battle. And a battle it is. Even "truth"—our very highest value—is not, as our ancestors thought, the name of a triumphant power directing history from within or from without; it is just the nominalization of an adjective of our (inescapably *our*) approbation…Normal nihilism is just the Western intellectual's rueful recognition and tolerance of her own historical and conceptual contingency. To be a normal nihilist is just to acknowledge that, however

[69] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 18.

> fervent and essential one's commitment to a particular set of values, that's all one ever has: as commitment to some particular set of values.[70]

After tracing the path of western thought from the age of the gods to the age of the forms through the age of the ego, Edwards concludes the journey by focusing on Nietzsche, and his proposal that God is dead. This "killing of God"[71] has produced a variety of value options to be chosen in the marketplace as one would at a shopping mall, and identity politics has taken the bait in the age of normal nihilism. As Edwards says, the role of God will be filled. In an age where identity is elevated to the highest good, identity politics tries to fill that value role, and in doing so identities tend to divide rather than unite, and the notion of good government for all becomes questionable.

In order to better understand what good government may entail, from a theological perspective, let us briefly consider Lutheran theologian Joel Biermann's distinction between the ultimate and penultimate goals of the temporal realm.

> The transformation of the culture into a Christian world is the goal for many believers, and a Christian America in which government and social policy are all forthrightly and fully based on scripture and Christian principles is the first objective to be achieved. In a sense, of course, the right-thinking and fully formed Lutheran can agree. The ultimate goal of God's activity in this world is certainly the absolute and exhaustive reign of Christ over every corner, creature, and king anywhere in creation. But timing is of the essence. While Lutherans readily acknowledge the ultimate goal of a Christian America, Russia, Brazil, and Nigeria, we also confess that this goal will be attained only at the glorious appearing of Christ on the Last Day. Until then, we wait, we hope, and we live in the tension. And until then, we strive for the penultimate goal of the temporal realm: not a Christian America, but merely a just America that upholds God's law for his creation.[72]

Thus the Christian is to be concerned about God's law for creation being honored, in all of its profoundness, even in the temporal though imperfect government under which he or she lives.

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[70] Edwards, *Plain Sense of Things*, 47.

[71] See Edwards, *Plain Sense of Things*, especially pp. 51–52.

[72] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 138–39.

Since identity politics in America stems from the lack of a shared vision or community, resorts to the politicization of everything as a means of accomplishing the goals that individuals or small groups desire, and in the process pits neighbors against each other in ways that can lead to the marginalization and exploitation of the neighbors, it ultimately does not have a vested interest in the right and ongoing functioning of the state as a means to achieve proximate justice.

While identity politics is able to highlight areas where the state is lacking in its ability to care for all of its citizens, the final results such as the lack of shared vision, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of the neighbor, and the improper functioning of the state are bigger problems, as I have demonstrated above. Christians cannot be satisfied with these final results. Thus in responding to the challenge of identity politics, the Christian, through careful theological reflection, will be able to contribute the following: 1) provide a comprehensive understanding of the world to a society which no longer has binding structures; 2) recognize the legitimate needs of the neighbors behind the turn to identity politics; 3) advocate on behalf of marginalized and needy neighbors, and indeed on behalf of the community; and 4) advocate for good government to accomplish the will of God, while pointing toward a future reality in which God's purposes and goals are fully realized.

Liberalism and Identity Politics

American political life has become both all-consuming and highly personal based on the identity or identities that a person chooses to use as a lens for engaging the world. People are beginning to take note of both this reality and the consequences that come from the move to identity politics. As our primary motivation for political engagement becomes the individual's present and unstable sense of identity, shared political goals have also been forgotten. No compelling narrative remains to construct our political vision. In the political left Lilla notes that

"what replaced a broad political vision was a pseudo-political and distinctly American rhetoric of the feeling self and its struggle for recognition,"[73] but this of course came as a response to the equally narrow political vision of the political right which he describes as the self being concerned only with matters of the economy. The competition of the feeling self and the economic self has become the platform on which our electoral politics plays out, according to Mark Lilla's two dispensations discussed earlier.

For some American Christians, the change toward identity politics has been particularly discomforting because Christianity no longer holds a privileged voice in politics. Which raises the question of what identity should inform Christian engagement in the world, but also warns against seeking some ideal solution to the current impasse in an American political identity. We have seen how Lilla's proposal for dealing with identity politics through a return to liberalism, for instance, is not without its problems.

Cressida Heyes recognizes identity politics as a fruit of the tree of liberalism.

> Institutionalized liberal democracy is a key condition of possibility for contemporary identity politics. The citizen mobilizations that made democracy real also shaped and unified groups previously marginal to the polity, while extensions of formal rights invited expectations of material and symbolic equality. The perceived paucity of rewards offered by liberal capitalism, however, spurred forms of radical critique that sought to explain the persistence of inequity.[74]

Her conclusion is that "[u]ltimately conventional liberal democracy, diverse radical critics claim, cannot effectively address the ongoing structural marginalization that persist … and may even be complicit with it."[75] Thus the project of liberalism itself has difficulty actually caring for those who are marginalized, and perhaps the reason for that is ultimately systemic: "Increasingly it is

[73] Mark Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal*, 78.

[74] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[75] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

difficult to see what divides anything called 'liberalism' from anything called 'identity politics,' and some commentators have suggested possible *rapprochements*."[76] Patrick Deneen is one such commentator.

In order to understand the connection between liberalism and the advent of American identity politics, and in order to begin considering whether the question raised by Lilla and Hunter—namely, whether identity politics is the fruit of liberalism and therefore unable to produce the shared vision and responsibility to neighbor necessary in a functioning society—, it is necessary that we examine liberalism itself more critically.[77] The founding of America, and indeed liberalism (our political philosophy) itself, began with many Christian assumptions (such as a Christian moral code) at its core, and these structural assumptions functioned in such a way as to bind citizens together. However, the progression of liberalism has torn those binding structures away, and that by design. Deneen comments,

> The achievement of liberalism was not simply a wholesale rejection of its precedents, but in many cases attained its ends by redefining shared words and concepts and, through that redefinition, colonizing existing institutions with fundamentally different anthropological assumptions. Liberty was fundamentally reconceived, even if the word was retained. Liberty had long been believed to be the condition of self-rule that forestalled tyranny, within both the polity and the individual soul. Liberty was thus thought to involve discipline and training in self-limitation of desires, and corresponding social and political arrangements that sought to inculcate corresponding virtues that fostered the arts of self-government.[78]

So the once readily available Christian witness within society no longer fulfills that role, and the problem of liberalism, as raised by identity politics, is that it has proven to be incapable of filling

[76] Heyes, "Identity Politics."

[77] James Edwards demonstrates well the philosophical progression of thought in the West which produced liberalism, and the consequences of it, in the first chapter of his book *The Plain Sense of Things*, where his account of the change in world views from the time of the gods to the present nihilism has removed, among other things, the assumption of a shared structure which provided a cultural foundation. James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things : The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

[78] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 23.

the hole. The freedom from evil and tyranny promised by the commitment to liberty has become instead freedom from responsibility and neighbor, and freedom of choice through self-expression or identity. These freedoms may not necessarily feed off each other, but in identity politics they often can and do. Where Lilla argues that Reaganism ushered in a new era focused on identity and the self, the pseudo-politics he derides, the reality is that the worm may have been in the bud much longer than that. In fact, Deneen notes that the premise of liberalism itself is the formation of an anticulture which uproots and replaces three cornerstones of human experience: nature, time and place.

> Liberal anticulture rests on three pillars: first, the wholesale conquest of nature, which consequently makes nature into an independent object requiring salvation by the notional elimination of humanity; second, a new experience of time as a pastless present in which the future is a foreign land; and third, an order that renders place fungible and bereft of definitional meaning. These three cornerstones of human experience—nature, time and place—form the basis of culture, and liberalism's success is premised upon their uprooting and replacement with facsimiles that bear the same names.[79]

Liberalism offered promise in organizing society. But in our era of identity politics, wondering whether there is something we actually all share, other than—to borrow a term from liberalism—the accident of our living in this country in this time, is quite necessary. If there is nothing shared, then who or what sets the rules, and to whom or to what does one have accountability? Deneen argues that the liberated individual, set free from ties that bind people together, is precisely the problem that makes liberalism so wrongheaded in general.

> Claiming to liberate the individual from embedded cultures, traditions, places, and relationships, liberalism has homogenized the world in its image—ironically, often fueled by claims of "multiculturalism" or, today, "diversity." Having successfully disembedded us from relationships that once made claims upon us but also informed our conception of selfhood, our sense of ourselves as citizens sharing a common fate and as economic actors sharing a common world, liberalism has left the individual exposed to the tools of liberation—leaving us in a weakened state in which the

[79] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 65.

> domains of life that were supposed to liberate us are completely beyond our control or governance. This suggests that all along, the individual was the "tool" of the liberal system, not—as was believed—vice versa.[80]

Thus, according to Deneen, the liberalism that Lilla is nostalgic for is actually unable to provide the necessary structure for shared citizenship. Deneen points to two assumptions at the heart of liberalism as a cause for this inability to provide shared citizenship and convictions: "Liberalism is most fundamentally constituted by a pair of deeper anthropological assumptions that give liberal institutions a particular orientation and cast: (1) anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and (2) human separation from and opposition to nature."[81] In other words, liberalism changed what it means to be human, and how to think about shared convictions, identity, and human relationships, not to mention the purpose of the state:

> Liberalism began with the explicit assertion that it merely describes our political, social, and private decision making. Yet it was implicitly constituted as a normative project: what it presented as a description of human voluntarism in fact had to displace a very different form of human self-understanding and experience. In effect, liberal theory sought to educate people to think differently about themselves and their relationships. Liberalism often claims neutrality about the choices people make in liberal society; it is the defender of "Right," not any particular conception of the "Good."[82]

Thus Deneen argues, and I agree, that liberalism is not able to provide a sufficient foundation for shared citizenship. This is important for the church to remember as the church considers its role in regards to political engagement in the state, and we will explore this more below.

Like Lilla, Deneen sees great importance in the concept of institutions. Like democratic persuasion, however, the work of institutions tends to be slow and requires patience and trust in a process or system. In identity politics, and in America in general, the recent years have brought a

[80] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 17.

[81] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 31.

[82] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 34.

weakening of institutions and the long-term vision they can provide, with the turn to the short-term politics of Facebook-type association. Again, this inability to look at the entire picture of human existence both past and future, and instead focus on the immediate concerns of the day is a component of liberalism that proves challenging.

> [Alexis de] Tocqueville notes that the propensity to think only within the context of one's own lifespan, and to focus on satisfaction of immediate and baser pleasures, is a basic 'propensity in human nature.' To chasten, educate, and moderate this basic instinct is the fruit of broader political, social, religious, and familial structures, practices, and expectations. Liberalism stresses our liberation from continuous time as a basic feature of our nature, and thus regards such formative institutions, structures, and practices as obstacles to the achievement of our untrammeled individuality.[83]

Liberalism roots us out of any particular history and places us untethered into the ocean of our own choices, in such a way that competition for rights vis-à-vis other groups of neighbors rather than mutual responsibility to one another as we exist now (and to our ancestors or future generations) takes a back seat.

Having no structures that bind us, in part because those which once did have been redefined, and in part because of the resulting liberation from a shared culture, we have now no tools to help us discern what should be political and what should not. In this context, there are basically two options: one is to become apolitical, and the other is to make everything political. For some people, the former is appealing. However, this turn away from active participation is hardly novel, as Hunter notes that "active participation of citizens is rare in history."[84] The latter, the politicization of everything, is the result that we have noticed in the particular playing out of identity politics in America. Lilla's critique on this point is particularly aimed at his fellow political liberals, but Hunter and Deneen help us understand that they are not the only ones for

[83] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 76.

[84] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 105.

whom this temptation exists:

> Again, my purpose here is not to suggest that the outcome of any particular issue is good or bad but rather to observe the historical tendency, in recent decades, toward the politicization of everything. This turn has brought about a narrowing of the complexity and richness of public life and with it, a diminishing of possibility for thinking of alternative ways to address common problems and issues.[85]

Further, Deneen's description of the two veins of American liberalism, the progressive and conservative, are very much in line with the "dispensations" in Lilla's account of the recent turn to identity politics in America. Deneen writes:

> First-wave liberals are today represented by "conservatives," who stress the need for scientific and economic mastery of nature but stop short of extending this project to human nature. They support nearly any utilitarian use of the world for economic ends but oppose most forms of biotechnological "enhancement." Second-wave liberals increasingly approve nearly any technical means of liberating humans from the biological nature of our own bodies. Today's political debates occur largely and almost exclusively between these two varieties of liberals. Neither side confronts the fundamentally alternative understanding of human nature and the human relationship to nature defended by the preliberal tradition.[86]

So we see that within the American political system the results of liberalism are coming to bear in different and complex ways, and the rise of identity politics can be included among the fruits of this political tradition. Identity politics has become a default mode of thinking for many, at least in part resulting from and feeding off the freedom from any binding structure created by liberalism, and this situation has led to the politicization of everything along distinct identity groups fighting for recognition. Because there is no telos, or goal, to which all people are looking, and politics becomes an every-identity-for-itself free-for-all seeking to accomplish its definition of right, there can be no shared vision. Therefore, an end result of the project of liberalism is identity politics, and identity politics in this context is ultimately suspicious of the

[85] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 106.

[86] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 36.

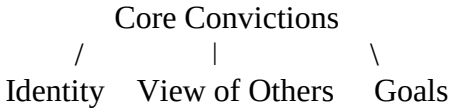
possibility of good government to provide justice for all. Thus, though Lilla assumes that the liberal approach to politics is able to provide an adequate foundation for a diverse citizenry, and that liberalism in itself may produce good governance, Deneen makes a more compelling case that this assumption is untenable. Liberalism's assumption that people can be empowered to live as they identify has turned out to be true, and as we have seen, the results are not necessarily good because not all identities are created equal in the world of identity politics. The general term "citizen" is arguably broader and more able to bear all of the rights and liberties ascribed to citizens than the adjectives that may go before citizen. This loss of shared vision induced by liberalism has resulted in the politicization of everything which is intensified by *ressentiment*. Where do we go from here? It has been suggested that the answer to liberalism is not more liberalism, as Lilla desires. But our aim in exploring the literature on the causes and shortcomings of identity politics thus far has not been to settle on a definitive political or theoretical account that can solve these challenges. Instead, our aim has been to show that identity politics is a contested and thus shaky starting point for Christians to envision ongoing and fruitful political engagement, and moreover, that something more lasting than any political system must be sought by Christians (in particular, Lutherans) for addressing identity politics and ultimately political engagement in the world.

Four Categories in a Theological Lens

It is necessary that Christians have a framework through which to consider the claims and effects of identity politics and how to formulate a Christian response to those concerns, and more importantly to assist the neighbor and community in doing so. Leading up to this point, I have spoken of four categories which are each related to the turn to identity politics. They are: core

convictions[87] (and the structures through which they are able to bind citizens together), identity, relationship to neighbors, and goals for the state. I argue that the relationships among these categories are helpful when considering both the actual functioning (in American identity politics), and the potential functioning of (for a Christian consideration) political engagement in the state. Therefore, I propose that the fourfold lens are able to demonstrate the way these four categories work together, thus allowing us to understand how identity politics functions as a determining account of political engagement.

Figure 2 Fourfold Lens



I agree with Lilla and Deneen that it is necessary for citizens of the same polis to share core convictions, and that identity politics is the replacement of shared core convictions with personal identity. In a well-functioning society, core convictions ideally serve the purpose of offering a binding structure for citizenship, with personal identity, relationship to others, and goals for the state being informed and regulated by that which is shared. In America, for instance, this includes legal things like the Constitution, but also concepts like the American Dream, and in a more nuanced way attitudes like "rugged individualism" have their place. Other elements, such as being Western, predominantly white, and predominantly Christian (especially in past

[87] To this point, I have used this term sparingly but intentionally. I am borrowing this term from Robert Benne with whom I will interact later on. The more frequently used phrases to this point include "binding structures" and "shared citizenship." The relationship between them is spelled out more fully in the following paragraphs, but there are many complementary aspects between the phrases.

generations) also have had an effect on American shared convictions and binding structures, though to a lesser and even unshared degree today. In a society marked by identity politics, however, *unshared* group or personal identity replaces *shared* core convictions. By doing this, as Neuhaus has noted, we are placing an undue, and indeed inappropriate, burden on identity for the shaping of our human existence. Politically speaking, identity politics runs the risk of elevating identity to the place of fully defining one's political engagement, and as such removing appeals to anything resembling agreed upon rules of engagement.

Moreover, identity politics then makes subjective moral claims about other humans based on their agreement or disagreement with an identity-driven agenda, so that the relationship to the neighbor is defined only for the duration of time it is convenient. In the process, relationships with neighbors who are not like ourselves are strained or ignored, and those most in need of the good gifts of God offered in part through government are likely to be mistreated or disenfranchised. Ideally, in a well-functioning society, with shared core convictions and an outward looking identity, the needs of the neighbor are cared for in concrete ways, and the political challenges we face together are able to be answered in ways which allow for dialogue and finding the best answers for all citizens. Of course, finding or accomplishing this ideal is easier said than done, and in the present—as Biermann has reminded us—it can only be achieved to a degree in the temporal realm and the state.

The goals for the state presented by identity politics are typically narrow and self-serving. Ideally, Lutherans with an appreciation for their identity in Christ would hold at least some shared core convictions about life in the polis moderated by more foundational theological core convictions. As concerned citizens or residents of the state, they would advocate for appropriate goals for the state, while holding the expectation of the final eschaton in tension. In doing so,

they would account not only for their own interests and those of their affinity groups, but as Sánchez has noted, act according to an ethic that goes beyond seeing the neighbor only in terms of their utility and thus make room for the needs of marginalized neighbors with legitimate claims to justice.

Identity Politics is a Lutheran Concern

For each of the reasons stated above under our fourfold lens, I argue that identity politics as it is expressed in the American political system today is, and should be, concerning to Lutheran Christians. Lutherans are not singly able to overcome the challenge of identity politics in society today, and there are no easy solutions. But the church, and Lutherans in particular, should be aware of the problem, understand how it affects them, and how to respond to it. My primary interest is in engaging identity politics in the context of a Western liberal state, but the lessons learned may apply to Christians seeking to faithfully engage any state in which they find themselves. Perhaps it seems unexpected that Lutherans, specifically confessional Lutherans, should be tempted to engage in identity politics. To be clear, I have never heard of a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod special interest group dominating political discourse. To be sure, the LCMS is interested in political outcomes, and has certainly been involved in a number of political activities, from lawsuits to establishing the Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty in Washington D.C. Perhaps, however, this is indicative of how slyly identity politics can work: faithful LCMS Christians engage in identity politics either by allowing an identity other than their identity in Christ to guide them, or, perhaps more likely, by compromising important theological distinctions in LCMS teachings that could ultimately provide a more solid witness.

The first reason that Lutherans must be concerned about identity politics is theological. For instance, Lutherans understand the role of the state in God's temporal reign over creation, and as

citizens or residents ultimately want a right functioning state in which to live and serve neighbor according to their vocations. Identity politics, however, does not have a particularly strong interest in yielding a right-functioning state, and that view has negatively impacted Lutherans who consciously or unconsciously engage in aspects of identity politics as citizens and residents, especially when they are tempted to join in divisive politics. Lutherans need to account more clearly for the theological account that guides or should guide their political engagement.

Moreover, and I will get to this in more detail in chapter three, my observation of many Lutheran pastors and lay people suggests that U.S. Evangelical attitudes toward seeing the church as an identity-driven political entity have taken root in at least some sectors of the LCMS. More concretely, the work of D. G. Hart on American Protestantism invites us to ask about the potential influence of Evangelical activism on a confessional church body like the LCMS. Evangelicalism in America came to be marked by factors including

> conversion (a conscious decision), and was sustained by private and small-group religious exercises as well as public displays of good works, which included personal evangelism, observance of a strict moral code, and support for social reforms that would create and sustain a righteous nation.[88]

The tendency to identify the church with a particular view of government has left many Christians, including Lutherans, in the awkward position of defending, or even endorsing, candidates and politicians who pander to Christians while making a mockery of the Christian faith. Lutherans who believe that the right politician will bring about a favorable status for Christians or a Christian nation have at times replaced theological core convictions with political ones guised as a form of Christianity. Lutherans are also not immune to the temptation of engaging the state from non-theological convictions, such as those espoused in tandem with

[88] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 60.

identity politics. Which again raises the question of how Lutherans can respond to this challenge from a place of theological convictions, what such convictions are, and how they shape identity, view of others, and goals for political engagement.

A second and related reason for Lutherans to be concerned about identity politics has to do with identity itself, which is ideally shaped by theological convictions. Thus, Lutheran Christians understand their identity as coming from God, existing among fellow creatures as his creation, existing among fellow Christians and in relationship to God himself as his baptized and redeemed people. The ramification that these identities have on political engagement are huge, even if political engagement is hardly a majority portion of the total definition of what a Christian is to be.

Thus, while identifying identity politics as a problem and cautioning against uncritically approaching engagement from an identity politics platform is the main goal of this chapter, it is not the only or primary goal of the thesis. Rather the ultimate question the thesis is moving towards is how Lutherans should approach political engagement from a clear theologically-informed identity. Such identity should be foundational and thus precede and guide the question of political engagement. This chapter has shown how identity politics is driven by certain core convictions, and raises the question, what core convictions should guide Lutheran political engagement? For instance, rather than attempting to bring about God's kingdom through the state (an Evangelical goal), or bemoaning the demise of the state and/or politicians (a goal of liberalism in identity politics) because it has failed us in some way, Lutherans recognize the validity of the state in God's temporal realm, and uphold it as an institution from God for preserving his creation. Moreover, for Lutheran Christians, a deeper understanding of the relationship between church and state within the framework of the two realms and vocation can

shape political engagement in a positive way that can self-consciously avoid the tribal side of identity politics, seek to uphold and advocate an account of God's justice within all the laws that govern the polis in which they live, and address constructively its concern for dealing with marginalized groups.

CHAPTER THREE

IDENTITY POLITICS AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Having demonstrated along with Cressida Heyes, Mark Lilla, James C. Edwards, and James Davison Hunter that identity politics is a concerning political problem, I now turn to my second argument, namely, that identity politics is also a theological problem. I alluded to this at the end of chapter two when I mentioned that there are two reasons that Christians, and Lutherans in particular, need to be concerned about identity politics. The first reason I gave is that identity politics tempts Lutheran Christians to neglect their theological account of reality by striving for something less comprehensive, including, but not limited to, political issues of the day. A second and related reason is that, for the Christian, a politically-defined identity itself should not be expected to bear the weight of political engagement, but rather should be appropriately defined, established, and nurtured by theological convictions. Reflecting back on the fourfold lens I offered in the previous chapter leads to this observation: where identity politics elevates identity to the place of core convictions, Christian core convictions properly frame and hold identity in its place. A ramification of this for Christian engagement is that the Christian then looks up to God and discerns life as revealed in the core convictions, is defined by them, and views her fellow citizens and the state in light of them. This direction runs contrary to the work of identity politics which places a particular identity itself as the core, thus potentially disregarding the needs of neighbors outside the particular group, and appealing to the state only out of self-interest. However, as with much in Christian theology, the move to reorient one's political life under theological core convictions is both deceptively simple, and enormously difficult. Instead, as we will see, the lure of identity politics extends even to much of what has come to pass for Christian engagement in the public square.

In this chapter I will demonstrate how Christians are enticed into engaging the state in a way which can lead to identity politics. I will begin by examining the reflections of Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson on their time working within the Christian Right generally, and the Moral Majority specifically, to demonstrate the kind of thinking that can lead a Christian into identity politics-based activism. In the previous chapter, we argued that identity politics is a *ressentiment*-induced engagement with politics whereby the primary motive for interaction is the correcting of perceived wrongs for a particular group united by the particular identity which believes itself to be marginalized. The Christian Right, in the understanding of the Moral Majority, believes itself to be marginalized by the advances of liberalism and secularism, and responds in such a way that their engagement is motivated by *ressentiment*, and their goals are the righting of wrongs. After this case study, we will advocate for a properly formed identity to inform Christian engagement. In order to demonstrate how this is missing in much of Christian engagement, and how Christian engagement is often susceptible to identity politics, we will look at the categories that James Davison Hunter and D. G. Hart offer, namely the "defensive against," "relative to," and "purity from" models in Hunter, as well as his own offering of "faithful presence,"[1] and the fundamentalists and liberals in Hart, through the use of my fourfold lens offered at the end of chapter two. Having demonstrated the potential for the turn to identity politics in each of these groups, I will close this chapter with some general observations about the potential for Christian engagement without resorting to identity politics, thus setting up our turn in chapter four to examine the Lutheran model.

[1] In order to be consistent with Hunter, I will use quotation marks when speaking of his four models, so I will regularly refer to the models as "defensive against," "relevance to," "purity from," and "faithful presence." This will not be the case when they appear in a heading. When there is no quotation around the words, as happens frequently when discussing the faithful presence model, I am speaking of a way of conceptualizing engagement rather than the model in particular.

An Identity Politics Case Study: The Moral Majority

In their 1999 book, *Blinded by Might*, Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson recall their experience with the Moral Majority, and reflect on how the politics of a Christian identity can become misguided, ineffective, and worst of all theologically inappropriate, even when cloaked under a banner of promoting morality. The efforts of the Moral Majority were such that they were focused on specific pieces of legislation, and getting certain candidates elected, as if "Ronald Reagan would solve all the ills of American society by himself."[2] In their attempt to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth through political means, itself a mistaken view of the mission of the church, American Evangelicals, such as those associated with leadership in the Moral Majority, have often latched onto this identity-based version of politics, thus missing the larger picture of who we are, and who we represent when we use the title "Christian."

Christians are rightly concerned with morality. The Bible is clear on what constitutes good and evil. The desire to know both intimately is the temptation in the garden of Eden: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The prophet Isaiah warns against mistaking good for evil: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20) The preacher to the Hebrews notes the need to continually grow in the ability to distinguish good and evil: "solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). And we are warned that in the end, all works will stand before God: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccles. 12:14).

[2] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 44–45.

For the Christian, the way to discern what is good and evil is by examining a thing in light of the pages of the Bible, which bears witness to God's story. Things which align with what God commands and reveals as good are indeed good, and things which oppose what God reveals, or things which he explicitly condemns, are indeed evil. Things neither explicitly commanded nor condemned are adiaphora, and it is a dangerous thing for Christians to stake an absolute "Christian" political position on matters of adiaphora. However, when evil is plain for all to see and the good must be taught, the Christian must boldly speak, and to not do so would be a sin of omission, which "damns no less than a sin of commission."[3]

Further, the Bible is clear that God is a God of justice, judging people according to his just laws concerning life before God and neighbor, which Christians are expected to follow. Solomon, for instance, explains that "[e]vil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely" (Prov. 26:5). Again, "[h]e has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8) And Jesus himself focuses our eyes on the need to uphold justice alongside mercy and faithfulness.

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt. 23:23–24)

Justice is a guide to discerning good and evil, and thus becomes a major motivator in how a Christian approaches politics. Through the lens of justice, we may see an important turn of events within identity politics. Positively speaking, identity politics allows for potentially marginalized or powerless groups to feel as if their voices are heard and their particular point of

[3] Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 174.

view is part of the conversation. Indeed, the church affirms the importance of making a place for the vulnerable in politics, or more fundamentally in creation, but rather than turning to the temptation of identity politics, or even viewing things through a liberal philosophical structure, the church has a different mission and message. In an ordered rendering of the Christian world, all people have worth because they belong to the human family created by God. Thus, the Christian recognizes neighbor as the fellow creature of God, and the fellow object of God's love in Christ. As Christ's reconciling instrument on earth, the Christian church can provide whatever belonging is craved for in a divided society or inhospitable world. Moreover, the church can do her work in a way that provides justice from the world's Creator to its creatures (including citizens and residents of a state), regardless of their particular politically-defined identities. Finally, the church can encourage and teach her members to practice justice and mercy in the temporal realm, including the state, through God's orders of creation and vocations.

So what of the Moral Majority as discussed by Dobson and Thomas? How does their agenda fit into the definition of identity politics? In the telling of Ed Dobson, "[w]hat started as a legitimate and rational response to the threat of theological liberalism evolved into a political agenda motivated more by fear than conviction."[4] Tracing their roots to the fundamentalist movement of the early 1900s, the authors explain how the fundamentalists began to see their mission as defending essential doctrines of the church from attack by, at first, theological, then in turn, political liberals (here speaking of the disposition, not the philosophy). At first, this meant defending five fundamental tenets of the faith, namely, the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, Christ's substitutionary atonement, Christ's resurrection, and his

[4] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 31.

second coming.[5] "Threatened by liberalism and its accommodation to unbelief, fundamentalists rose to defend minimal doctrinal essentials—without which the Christian faith would cease to be valid."[6] Thus, the original fundamentalists took on a defensive position, feeling as if they themselves were marginalized within the church. This was part of a bigger change in church organization.

> By 1918 the liberals and the fundamentalists had clearly articulated their positions and were ready for a head-on collision. Conservative Christians held their first major national conference in Philadelphia that year, with more than five thousand people attending. The next year they met at the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago and decided to go on the offensive against liberalism by establishing their own organization, which would later be known as the World's Christian Fundamentals Association. They also began advocating the establishment of new Bible institutes and conferences to combat the influence of liberalism. This was a major change of direction. Instead of staying in the major denominations and fighting against the liberals for control, the early fundamentalists withdrew and began their own organizations.[7]

This theological split on its own had major implications for Western Christianity, and looking back now it is plain to see that this split would have implications for a worldview which for centuries had been shaped by Christian thinkers, many of whom were what would be described as orthodox, or claimed by conservative theologians today. However, this split was hardly the only challenge for the church in the nineteenth-century.

Reflecting on the State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes trial of 1925, Dobson says of fundamentalists, "as conservatives were building a head of steam, a local courtroom drama played out in the national press that would have a profound impact on how they would be perceived by others as well as by themselves."[8] The trial, and the press coverages that brought

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[5] See Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 31–32.

[6] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 33.

[7] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 33.

[8] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 33.

news of it to the nation, "was a reflection of the larger issue of the confrontation between biblical supernaturalism and secular empiricism."[9] This confrontation was played out on multiple fronts, but three in particular are named by Dobson: Darwinian evolution, higher criticism, and anti-supernaturalism.[10] In the midst of this battle, the "Scopes trial was really the final confrontation between science and the Bible for that era, and the Bible lost."[11] The politician tasked with defending biblical creationism, William Jennings Bryan, was no match for the attorney who cross examined him, Clarence Darrow. Though Bryan won the trail, the damage was done.

> Technically, Bryan (who died just five days later) won the trial, but in the court of public opinion he suffered a great loss—a loss not only for him, but also for conservative, Bible-believing Christians, who had become the laughing stock of the media and the nation. In the aftermath of the trial, fundamentalists withdrew from the public square and focused on building their own subculture of churches, denominations, schools, organizations, radio stations (and eventually, television), and associations.[12]

That is not to say that over the next 50 years religion did not have a presence in American life. Indeed, looking at the challenges that John F. Kennedy had because of his Roman Catholic faith, or considering the inspirational faith-filled leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. is enough to dispense that notion.

However, for fundamentalists the work was done in local congregations and through ecclesiastical organizations, colleges, and the like, rather than by being politically engaged. Thus, the reentry of religious conservatives to public life through the work of the Moral Majority in the 1980s was shocking for many, especially in the media.[13] In the process, multiple false

[9] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 34.

[10] See Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 34–35.

[11] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 35.

[12] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 35.

[13] See Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 35–36.

narratives popped up concerning the Moral Majority, including "that the purpose of the Moral Majority was to take over America."[14] However, Dobson demonstrates that this was not the goal, but in the process his definition of the goal reminds us a lot of the definition of *ressentiment*.

> The Moral Majority was founded as a reaction against a secular society that was increasingly hostile to conservative Christians. Christians believed that they were an oppressed minority and that if they did not stand up, they would be buried by the secularists and the humanists. The Moral Majority was seen as an organization to stop the rising tide of secularism. It was a fortress to protect, not a battleship to attack. We were not interested in taking over America. We were only interested in making sure that we did not get overtaken.[15]

Thus, in helping to get Ronald Reagan elected in 1980, conservatives saw the Reagan-Bush landslide in 1984 as the greatest moment of opportunity for conservative Christians in the twentieth-century.[16]

However, the authors recognize that their perceived victories were less than they had hoped for. By the mid-1990s, the aspirations of the moment of opportunity had become a recognition that, culturally speaking, "Christian values had long since been forgotten."[17] Concerning the state of affairs in the late 1990s, Dobson begins with considering President Bill Clinton's scandal leading to impeachment:

> That 70 percent sill approved of his "job performance" on the day of his impeachment is another indication of the Moral Majority's impotence. Crime is still rampant, judging from the overcrowding of our prisons. Drugs are even more readily available to our children than they were twenty years ago. Pornography has moved from the back shelf to the television sets in our living rooms. The number of abortions performed each year has declined only slightly. Homosexuality is shrugged off as an acceptable, alternative lifestyle. And even within our churches, divorce rates continue to climb, mirroring those of people who do not attend church.[18]

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[14] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 36

[15] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 36.

[16] See Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 40.

[17] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 42.

[18] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 42–43.

However despite the pessimistic tone, Dobson concludes that the Moral Majority was not a complete waste of time and money as it ultimately forced the fundamentalist Christian position on issues into the public discussion, and gave conservative Christians an entrance into political activity and activism.

In terms of their Christian convictions, it is plain to note that engagement via the Moral Majority sought to uphold the good, and denounced evil according to a Christian worldview. Thus, they critiqued extramarital affairs, crime, drugs, pornography, abortion, the normalization of homosexuality, and divorce. On the surface then, the Moral Majority appears to be a useful way for Christians to begin contemplating faithful civic engagement. However, the Moral Majority also spawned runs for office, including a 1988 Presidential campaign by Pat Robertson. This change in engagement over seven years (from the inauguration of Reagan in 1981 to the campaign in 1988) was a far cry from the fundamentalist disengagement of the prior decades. But the authors wonder whether this move was a miracle or a deception:

> In 1980, through the influence of Jerry Falwell and others, conservative people of faith were convinced that it was acceptable for Christians to be involved in politics. We were also convinced that it was legitimate for pastors to be engaged in the process. Although we had criticized black pastors for their involvement in the civil rights struggle, we had now changed our minds and had jumped in ourselves. With the candidacy of Pat Robertson, we were now declaring that it was also desirable for a minister to become president. This change in thinking and action is miraculous, given the short period of time in which it took place. Or was it deception?[19]

The change from being politically hidden to politically prominent is certainly something that should cause Christians, especially those like the members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) who do not fall into a fundamentalist description, to pause before fully embracing the movement for a Christian America, and thus running the risk of deception.

[19] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 42.

Many of the criteria that constitute identity politics engagement are seen in the work of the Moral Majority, and fundamentalist Christians in general. Perhaps the most evident is the concept of *ressentiment*. Feeling betrayed by fellow Christians, and in the midst of a cultural drift away from the church's moral convictions, and moreover, feeling as if they had no power, conservative Christians reengaged politics by helping Ronald Reagan win the 1980 election with "the moralizing revenge of the powerless."[20] We see an example of political engagement brought about by the perceived disenfranchisement and powerlessness of a marginalized group.

In this case, however, building a politically-defined group identity was not without its problems. Through the course of a personal narrative centered around his childhood growing up in Northern Ireland,[21] Dobson is able to draw three conclusions about the fruits that can come from viewing the neighbor other as less than a fellow creature, and worse as an enemy. From his perspective, this can happen when politics and religion become too blended, whether in the conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, or when Christians engage in identity politics in a form such as the one the Moral Majority was susceptible to.

Dobson's first conclusion is that "*When religion and politics are one and the same, the situation tends toward intolerance.*"[22] As an example, he notes the case of the battles in Northern Ireland, this led to the rationalization of violence and taking up of arms against the other group, Protestants and Roman Catholics believing that the other side was not legitimately Christian. Similarly, we see in identity politics the potential rationalization of violence against the neighbor

[20] This is the definition offered by Heyes above, see Heyes, *Identity Politics*.

[21] Chapter 5 in Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, in which he narrates how the rivalry between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland is both alien (between Protestants and Catholics there is relative peace in the United States) and familiar (between the Religious Right and others there is often strife), and that this power struggle ultimately produces bad fruit between neighbors.

[22] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 80 (italics original).

when a judgement is made about their moral worth on the subjective ground of identity rather than the objective concreteness of their humanity. Further, "*The harsher the rhetoric, the more it is likely that it will lead to violence.*"[23] Especially concerning for Dobson is that already by 1999, when his book was published, there was "harsh political rhetoric of the Religious Right" and the rhetoric (on both sides) "has become more confrontational and threatening."[24] This has only been exacerbated in the twenty-first century, particularly though not exclusively through identity politics. Violence against the neighbor is not the call of Christians, but in identity politics, and in religion too closely aligned with penultimate political goals, Christians are no more able to disengage from the potential of violence (often verbal rather than physical) than other identity types against those with whom we disagree. God demands better from Christians in terms of relationship to the neighbor, including those who are not like them in every way. Violence in the name of the church is concerning enough on its own, yet Dobson has two more conclusions to offer.

The second critique Dobson offers is the most damning for Christians who are tempted to engage politics through an identity-driven agenda: "*When pastors become entangled too deeply with politics, they harm the gospel of Jesus."*[25] In demonstrating the mistakes of the Christian Coalition and other Christian political groups in America, he opines:

> They are selling their religious priorities for a mess of political pottage. In the process, they are harming the gospel. They are implying that there is a proper Christian position on nearly every political issue. They are implying that disagreement with their political positions is, in fact, disagreement with Jesus. They are alienating others from themselves and the gospel they believe. They have forgotten the words of Jesus, who said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were,

[23] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 81 (italics original).

[24] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 81.

[25] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 80 (italics original).

> my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36).[26]

Here lies the real rub of a Christian turn to identity politics: we believe that political engagement with the truth of God will be compelling enough not only to transform society into the image we believe God wants to see, but we also inherently assume that by doing so more will come to know the gospel and believe. Instead, this engagement often rather draws unhelpful and unnecessary sharp divisions between neighbors, and even between Christians: "We have politicized the gospel with our agendas. To be part of the Christian right is to be part of the Republican party. For some, this means that to be a *real* Christian, you must be a Republican."[27]

Dobson's final conclusion is that engagement of this sort will naturally alter the goals one has for the state. If the forced implication of God's law upon all people is the use of identity politics to achieve gains for a particular group, then the other extreme is pretending that God's law does not apply to all people, or that it is wholly irrelevant today. The Moral Majority believed in the power of the legislative and judicial branches of government to accomplish moral and spiritual goals, for instance. There was an expectation that Ronald Reagan would fulfill such goals as "a ban on abortion, bringing the gay rights movement to a halt, the 'clean-up' of television, and a reversal of the explosion of pornography."[28] None of these things are theologically wrong and Christians rightly advocate and pray for them, yet at the same time it is impossible to force the implication of the law on citizens and residents, especially in a complex and diverse society such as the one we live in. How then should a Christian consider goals for the state? Dobson offers a good initial suggestion: "We need to remember the priority of

[26] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 80–81.

[27] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 81 (italics original).

[28] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 80.

justice."[29] He argues: "At times, the greater issues of human justice transcend political boundaries. The real issue today is not whether one is a Democrat or a Republican, but whether one is committed to justice for all."[30] Striving for justice not only for some but for all is both admirable, and, as we saw above, biblical.

The Church's Adoption of Identity Politics

Identity is a complex thing. One way to consider our identity is in terms of relationships. In this way, the name one is given by her parents serves as one form of identity, and whether one has siblings or not can further shape identity. Similarly, the estate of marriage is an indicator of identity—one could be single, married, or widowed. But when a woman marries and takes on a new last name, her identity perhaps changes more dramatically than her husband's identity does. If God blesses the marriage with children, the identity expands to include parenthood. One or both of the spouses will likely seek employment, thus forming further relationships and forms of identity. Friends will come and go, neighbors will move, and allegiances and priorities will fluctuate, providing ample opportunity for various forces to have their effect on one's identity. There is great wisdom in Neuhaus's caution to consider what can bear the weight of defining who a person is.[31]

The above reflections from Ed Dobson give us an insider's view and sympathetic yet critical reflection of the difficulties that arise as the church engages politics, and furthermore, demonstrate the complicity and simplicity with which Christians can turn to identity politics. The goal of this section then is to argue that Lutherans and fellow Christians are susceptible to this

[29] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 46.

[30] Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 46.

[31] See my opening comments of chapter two and the concept developed by Neuhaus in *American Babylon*.

turn because they are often unclear about, or incomplete in their understanding of, their identity in Christ and how that identity influences their self-understanding, relationship to others, and goals for involvement in the state. Christians, like all people, struggle to fully understand their identities, and to think critically about their engagement in the state. Through the rest of this chapter, I will look at a variety of ways in which Christians have understood their engagement of the state in the temporal realm, and I will argue that each of the models are unable to avoid the trappings of identity politics. In the process, I will also begin to demonstrate what kind of model could successfully avoid such trappings, thus opening the door for my next chapter which will be an examination of a Lutheran approach to political engagement in God's world.

In my fourfold lens introduced in chapter two, I demonstrated the need for an account of the relationship between identity, neighbors and goals for the state as subservient to and shaped by core convictions that are not ultimately political but theological. The dynamic in the relationship between the aforementioned four elements is at play both politically and theologically. As we discovered in chapter two, effective political engagement is contingent upon the participants having enough shared convictions that there can be a binding structure holding the operation together. Without that binding structure, which I argued along with Edwards and Deneen has been destroyed respectively in the West by shifts such as normal nihilism and, more immediately in America by reinterpretations of liberalism as individual person (or group) freedom from structure, a great number of challenges for engagement in society have arisen. Identity politics is but one of them. Specifically, I argued that these challenges as seen in identity politics include the lack of shared vision for the country and her people, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of marginalized neighbors, and the improper functioning of the state. Where there is no binding value, ethic, or structure bringing

people together, politics becomes the pursuit of power by means of the disregard or active discrimination against the neighbor. Thus there is not only a theological but even a political imperative that Christians understand and advocate for certain core convictions to serve as a theological framework for the benefit of the neighbor and the state as they engage in political reflection and action.

A challenge could immediately be raised as to whether the Christian should seek to *impose* her theological beliefs on the government or fellow citizens. That question is easily answered in both of its assertions. First, Christian core convictions must be theological truths which exist for all times and places. Because these core convictions about God's work in his world are grounded in Scripture and the rule of faith, they are statements from the eternal God, and thus are immutable and have a normative character for the shaping of creaturely identity, human relationships as God's creatures, and the roles of the church and the state in his world. In other words, the core convictions shape the Christian's life—including her political life. There is no question then that the core convictions Christians should uphold and support matter and are the right ones for engaging politically. The second concern of the challenge is whether Christians should *impose* their core convictions on the government and fellow citizens. That challenge assumes that any one person can actually impose his or her will on all others, a condition that the vast majority of people will never find themselves in and even less in America. However, in the hypothetical sense that a Christian was influential enough to impose her will, she must discern whether her particular views are actually based on Christian core convictions, or something else such as a personal agenda or worse yet vendetta. If the former (legitimate core convictions), then she should implement it to the best of her ability without coercion or violence. If the latter (personal agendas), she should avoid them completely. Moreover, and more positively stated, a

distinction must be made between agreement on ultimate core convictions and disagreements on penultimate forms of legislative proposals shaped by those convictions. Given the nature of American politics, it is highly unlikely that any candidate will ever succeed in passing all of her desired legislation; therefore, compromise is a necessity. In discerning when and to what extent to compromise, Joel Biermann's "Degree of Revelation Principle"[32] is quite helpful. The advice he gives pastors speaks to the voter and politician as well.

> When appropriate, he will step boldly into the temporal realm and speak God's truth with authority and discernment—which means he will carefully prioritize the issues he chooses to address and will speak with conviction and force only when God's Word speaks with equal conviction and force.[33]

Thus there is also a theological imperative for a Christian to consider Christian core convictions as he or she engages the state, whether as politician, pastor, or voter.

So how should Christians see themselves in society today, and what defines Christian core convictions? Admittedly, the way a Christian sees himself individually and as a member of society will often change based on various cultural realities, even as we see in America. For example, in the past, Christians in America arguably found themselves in a more favorable status before the state, but today in a post-Christian society such privilege is much less evident, so that in some instances Christians may even be marginalized for their faith. It is also the case that legitimate diversity in vocational responsibilities vary from person to person based on career choice, where he lives, neighbors served, and the like. Thus even a primarily Christian identity is not a pure Christian identity, but instead a temporal understanding of Christian identity which requires additional modifiers. The question is whether such modifiers replace core convictions or are shaped by them. In an era of identity politics, for example, it is tempting for Christians to put

[32] See Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 133–38.

[33] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 138.

their identity as *American* Christians before prior and normative *Christian* core convictions, thus exchanging the eternal for the temporal, or the ultimate for the penultimate. When this reordering of priorities happens, the neighbor other comes to be viewed as an object or opponent rather than as a fellow creature of God; and one's goals for the state may become partisan imperatives, even to the point of being a litmus test for "true" faith. If then the church, or an individual member or group within it, bears an identity that is primarily focused on itself and its rights, its political engagement will become self-serving rather than neighbor-oriented—for instance, persons or groups in the church will act as if they are owed something from the state and must fight for their rights. This goal for political life not only is incomplete and inappropriate for the church, but more importantly, it follows from convictions at odds with identity in Christ. Which raises the question: What constitutes a proper theologically-informed approach to political identity and engagement? In particular, what would a Lutheran contribution look like, and how will it respond to the challenge of identity politics? This question will be answered in chapter four.

Models of Church-State Relationship

Before we begin constructing a Lutheran approach to American politics specifically as it relates to the challenges of identity politics, we do well first to consider a variety of other approaches that various Christians have proposed or utilized in framing their political engagement. In order to accomplish a critical reading of these various models, I will concentrate on the analysis of three areas in particular: the core convictions presupposed by each model, the understanding of the Christian's identity specifically as the Christian relates to the world, and in turn how the presuppositions and understanding can lead to the trappings of identity politics. In order to accomplish this, I will utilize my fourfold lens introduced in the previous chapter. Because of the large influence of the Christian Right in America, and because engagement in a

manner consistent with the Christian Right is a temptation for LCMS Christians, I will interact with them more than other groups in the American political landscape.

The first author I will engage is James Davison Hunter. In his book *To Change the World*, he evaluates three flawed models of church-state engagement, specifically "defensive against," "relevance to," and "purity from." In addition to Hunter's "defensive against" model, I will add work by James Gilmore which fleshes out the narratives underlying the core convictions of the Christian Right, thus helping see how these narratives construct their lived reality and model of engagement in the world. By drawing out their core convictions and explaining the identity construction, relationship to neighbor, and political goals of each of the groups discussed by these authors, I will argue that each of Hunter's three models, flawed for other reasons in his own estimation, also fail to avoid the trappings of identity politics.

From there, I will examine Hunter's own proposal of "faithful presence." Much of Hunter's work is to be highly commended and I will mine this model for the value it contains. For instance, Hunter calls Christians to understand rightly who they are, and to be cognizant of faithful and fully present engagement with the neighbor. I will also argue, however, that Hunter's "faithful presence" model can be supplemented by engaging more fully with a Lutheran theology of God's work through his two realms. This is a minor but important concern. Hunter does not respond adequately to the challenge of identity politics insofar as his approach does not fully recognize God's positive purposes for the state in the temporal realm. We will say more later about how this aspect of his position potentially opens a door to the allure of identity politics.

After engaging Hunter's important work, I will briefly turn to the work of D. G. Hart, specifically including his descriptions of fundamentalists and liberals in American Protestantism, and demonstrate how members of the church in both categories similarly engage the state in

ways that can lead to identity politics. Discussing Richard V. Pierard's work on Evangelicals and politics, Hart explains that, according to Pierard,

> the ties linking evangelical Christianity to political conservatism are so numerous and pervasive that it is possible to say the two are "yoked together." Just as obvious to Pierard was the danger of evangelical Protestants, in the words of the Bible, being unequally yoked "to the way of the world." "The evangelical church," he concluded, "has tied itself to the *status quo* of contemporary middle-class America and traded its prophetic ministry for a potage of public acclaim and economic well-being.[34]

Hart's use of Pierard's critique shows how Evangelical Protestants are not immune from confusing core convictions of the church's place in the world with an unhealthy and divisive nationalism, which in turn drives political engagement in the interest of establishing a Christian state. As Hart notes, "evangelicals never had any trouble insisting that faith should and, indeed, would make a difference in everything from the domestic relations of families to the international politics of nations."[35] In an age of identity politics, the confusion of church and state in nation-building among fundamentalists has become politicized over against their liberal enemies. Among liberals, on the other hand, much of the core convictions of the church have been stripped away, and liberal political goals have themselves become the core convictions of their activism. This shift toward the replacement of Christian core convictions for political goals was especially discernable as the urbanization of the nation placed its influence on the church: "But the forces of industrialization, the discoveries of modern science, and the demands of international politics undermined the old absolutes of church and theology. Urban Christians assimilated the outlook of modern society"[36] The result, as Hart concludes, is that "the conflict between liberals and conservatives was one of two competing Christian cultures, one southern

[34] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 75.

[35] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 75.

[36] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 65.

and rural, the other northern and urban."[37] In dialogue with Hart, I argue that ultimately both church cultures (fundamentalist, liberal) in American Protestantism have been susceptible to identity politics because they have allowed a politically-formed identity (say, nationalism and modernism, respectively) to replace the core convictions of Christianity in political engagement.

Defensive Against, Relevance To, Purity From: Hunter's Three Models

Two strong reasons offer themselves for choosing to grapple with Hunter's three models of church-state relations instead of choosing a more classic typology such as H. Richard Niebuhr's five-fold description in *Christ and Culture*.[38] First, Hunter himself deals with the challenge of identity politics in his book, and as identity politics is a more recent development not dealt with Niebuhr's book, it is in this case more beneficial to look at a contemporary source who has an eye on the challenge we are addressing. Thus, as Hunter says, "these paradigms primarily apply to the historically specific circumstances of Christianity in contemporary North America."[39] A second reason to prefer engagement with Hunter's work is that by providing three categories, he is able to account for the general Christian attraction and response to our two-party lived experience. The Christian Right is summarized in the "defensive against" paradigm, the Christian Left in the "relevance to" paradigm. Before offering his own model, he also provides the other two paradigms a present alternative in the "purity from" model, thus accounting for the

[37] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 65.

[38] Certainly no scholar can study the workings of American political engagement without reading and considering the masterwork itself. A project of future interest may be to consider following Niebuhr's models through to their modern day ends in American political engagement, and from there running each through my fourfold lens to discern how the core convictions Niebuhr describes, and the formed identities in those groups, demonstrate their proclivity toward, or perhaps in a corrected understanding of Christ and Culture in Paradox such as one proposed in *Christ in Culture in Dialogue*, the avoidance which I will argue the Lutheran Voices are able to successfully account for. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). See also, Angus J. L. Menuge, ed., *Christ and Culture in Dialogue* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999).

[39] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 214.

three general approaches taken by Christians today.

In introducing his three paradigms, Hunter seeks to understand, on their own terms, how each model views the world and their engagement with it. His argument begins with the best of assumptions, that "Christians today—of whatever stripe—sincerely want to engage the world for good."[40] However, he is only prepared to look at this engagement after he demonstrate that "Christians have embraced strategies that are, by design, incapable of bringing about the ends to which they aspire."[41] The reason for that is that "Christians have failed to understand the nature of the world they want to change and failed even more to understand how it actually changes."[42] Thus Hunter's goal is not to present a new strategy for grasping power as understood in the conventional sense, but to properly orient Christians in their engagement. The temptation to power, in the conventional sense, is a temptation that each of the groups Hunter describes has succumbed to, each in their own way. But what is this power? Hunter spends a good deal of time examining how power and American politics relate. Hunter suggests that there are multiple factors at work in legitimate democratic power, including the sanction of the people, shared values, and a final coercive force, such as the state.

> In principle, of course, the legitimacy of a democratic state to exercise force derives from the sanction of the people. This is part of the meaning of the concept "popular sovereignty." It is also true that democratic institutions have their own ideals, traditions, symbols, and practices, and these too have their own legitimacy and power to bind. These forms of legitimacy are nothing to dismiss lightly for they are the difference between a regime that is tolerable and one that is intolerable. That said, it is important not to forget that at the root of every social order is coercion or the threat of its use. Yet the authority of democratic government is not above challenge and its resilience is not unlimited…Ideas of popular sovereignty and democratic practices and procedures, then, make the use of state power palatable, but only up to a point.[43]

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[40] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 99.

[41] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 99.

[42] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 99.

[43] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 102.

However, this entry point into political theory is also the seat in which Hunter begins to discuss the troubling aspects of identity politics. In the above paragraph, we see the potential for the loss of binding structures—when the ideals, traditions, symbols, and practices become unshared—which leads to an unshared political vision. Hunter also notes that by relying too much on the coercive force of government, we have embraced the politicization of everything. In this regard, he offers a particularly important insight: "law increases as cultural consensus decreases."[44]

Hunter argues that this politicization "is most visibly manifested in the role that ideology has come to play in public life; the well-established predisposition to interpret all of public life through the filter of partisan beliefs, values, ideals, and attachments."[45] In a sense, the three groups that Hunter describes could be considered in terms of their religious political ideology. Each of these groups has a particular understanding of the "good" that the church is to offer society, and as society has politicized everything, the church has come along for the ride. In this way, the particular ideology of the group can begin to function in a manner consistent with identity politics.

> Each and every faction in society seeks the patronage of state power as a means of imposing its particular understanding of the good on the whole of society. Thus, the turn toward the power of the state is also seen in the rise of ideologically driven special interest organizations, the geometric growth in policy-oriented litigation, the political conflicts over federal and Supreme Court justices, and the ideological conflict over nearly all public issues: education, the environment, the family, gender, sexuality, art, faith, and so on.[46]

Thus, as one engages the state in its present American context, "it is hardly surprising that the language of partisan politics has come to shape how we understand others."[47] And the church is

[44] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 102.

[45] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 103.

[46] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 103–04.

[47] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 105.

not immune to this labeling in either direction. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how these two issues, the lack of shared vision and the politicization of everything, are challenges in identity politics which are identified both by the liberal Lilla and the conservative Hunter. Hunter takes the analysis of this challenge one step further, however, by tying the whole problem to power: "politicization means that the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive power of the state."[48] With this articulation of the problem, we are able to understand more deeply the final piece of the identity politics puzzle, the issue of *ressentiment*. Two points from Hunter's definition are especially worth repeating as we begin to examine his three paradigms. First, "[t]he sense of injury is the key."[49] Having this sense, real or imaginary allows for the cultivation of fear and a clinging to the hope of power. Second, in "this logic, it is only natural that wrongs need to be righted. And so it is, then, that the injury—real or perceived—leads the aggrieved to accuse, blame, vilify, and then seek revenge on those whom they see as responsible."[50] Thus *ressentiment* "is expressed as a discourse of negation; the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable."[51] Embracing this causes severe theological problems.

We have defined identity politics as a *ressentiment*-induced engagement with politics whereby the primary motive for interaction is the correcting of perceived wrongs for a particular group united by the particular identity which believes itself to be marginalized. We have also noted that this turn to identity politics produces at least four significant concerns, namely, a lack of shared vision, the politization of everything, the mistreatment of the marginalized neighbor,

[48] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 106.

[49] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

[50] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

[51] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

and the improper functioning of the state. Now, it is time to begin examining whether, and, as I will argue, how, the Christian Right functions as a form of identity politics for American Christians. In order to accomplish this, first, I will describe the positions of each model by engaging with the authors involved. Then I will make use of my fourfold lens for analyzing how each model deals with the relationships between core convictions, identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state. To structure this part of the analysis, I will summarize the relationship between the four parts of the lens, with an eye toward answering two questions. First, does the particular group's engagement fit the definition of identity politics (i.e., is there *ressentiment*-induced engagement, do members construct a narrative of marginalization, and are they seeking correctives for the ways in which they believe themselves to be wronged)? Second, how does their engagement relate to the four significant concerns that a turn to identity politics raises. I will use this model of examination for each of the groups that I look at in this section.

Defensive Against

The first of the three paradigms Hunter offers is "defensive against." The "defensive against" paradigm includes the fundamentalists that Hart identifies, but also Evangelicals and conservative Catholics. Many conservative Lutherans, especially in the LCMS, would fall into this category. Hunter describes this group as follows:

> For Christians operating within this paradigm, their objective has always been, first and foremost, to retain the distinctiveness of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the larger world. Against the challenges of late modernity, this has not been easy not least because their proprietarian relationship to American culture has obligated them to preserve the nation as well as their faith. The defensive nature of this paradigm is rooted in the massive nature of the assault of secular modernity. Conservatives of all confessions have been angry about their loss of prominence, as

> well as anxious, on guard, and self-protective in ways that have created walls between themselves and the outside world.[52]

Hence the name "defensive against" to describe this model of the church's place in the world.

Hunter notes that this paradigm is not exclusive only to churches, but also includes para-church groups which "have held out the hope that they could "hold the ground against apostasy" and even win back the larger culture to a situation where Christianity would regain its place of privilege."[53] To this end there have been two strategies: evangelizing unbelievers, and launching a "direct and frontal attack against the enemies of the Christian faith and worldview."[54] Hunter compares it to having one hand open and one hand ready to fight against an array of issues.[55] The ultimate goal for the group is that the church "would regain its standing in society, the family and local community would recover its Christian character, and the leading spheres of social life—including law and government, social welfare and reform, hospitals, education, and the like—would again be influenced by the categories and codes of Christian moral understanding."[56]

From this summary of the group, two things are immediately apparent, and need to be noted. First, positively, the group is driven by an ethic of faithfulness for which they cannot be faulted. Their confidence in the transformative power of the Christian faith leads to a desire for a "Christian America" in which the majority desire Christian morality, and to this end they engage in a faithful expression in public life. Second, negatively, it is also important to notice the creep of *ressentiment* in this worldview. Cressida Heyes's earlier definition of *ressentiment* as equating

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[52] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 214.

[53] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 214.

[54] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

[55] Hunter notes that this is "of course, precisely what they have done, one issue after the other right through the century: temperance, creation and evolution, communism, prayer and Bible reading in the public schools, pornography, abortion, feminism and the traditional family, vulgarity in the arts and entertainment, and homosexuality and gay rights." Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

[56] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

to the "moralizing revenge of the powerless" fits. As the power and privilege of Christian orthodoxy has waned in recent decades, this group has continued "to believe, by and large, that the main problem in the world is secularization; if only God could be re-enshrined in the social order, they assume, the culture would be restored."[57] Thus, feeling powerless, they have an understandable moral imperative to fight to take back the ground ceded to secularism. Hunter's analysis at this point is congruent with the criticisms Thomas and Dobson brought against the Moral Majority.

Hunter identifies a "leading public edge"[58] of each of his paradigms. The leading public edge of the "defensive against" paradigm is the Christian Right. Hunter notes that this group's power peaked in 2004, yet "because the logic on which it is based is so embedded within the history and consciousness of American Christianity, it will not likely die anytime soon; but it will be reconstituted."[59] As I will demonstrate, the more recent turn to identity politics offers this group one attractive opportunity for reconstitution, and it does so precisely because of the internal logic of the Christian Right that Hunter details.

In the second chapter, I noted that Mark Lilla's description of identity politics includes examining all political issues through the lens of identity or particular worldviews connected to the identity of the group. For politically right-of-center Christians, this is no different.

> Christians who are politically conservative want what all people want: namely, to have the world in which they live reflect their own likeness. The representation of social life they imagine and desire is not a reflection of the reality they live, but rather their highest ideals expressed as principles for ordering individual and collective passions and interests. It is a vision of human flourishing, but one obviously framed by the particularities of their distinct worldview.[60]

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[57] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

[58] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 213.

[59] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 111.

[60] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 111.

In a biblical Christian worldview, understood in a conservative American interpretation, many issues, especially those related to moral living, are framed through the lens of right-and-wrong, or holy-and-sinful. Thus, for a conservative Christian, considering political issues is often an either-or, totalized position. Further, these positions are based on something that many in this camp view as non-negotiable, the Word of God, which is held in high regard theologically among the Christian Right.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Christian Right, and those who would associate with the "defensive against" paradigm, would pit their highest ideals as morally superior against inferior ideals which, when framed biblically, are not only seen as theologically bad, but also as bad for society. As Hunter describes, these Christians have felt challenged by a number of forces: "These challenges have been expressed intellectually, educationally, and artistically, but also commercially, through advertising, and in the range of entertainment media. Not least, all of these challenges have also been expressed legally and politically."[61] And for the Christian Right, these challenges are new and problematic as they run against the nostalgic view of what America once was.

Christians are interested in the right-ordering of society, and the Christian Right contends that a rightly ordered society is what existed at the founding of the United States. Hunter explains:

> The question of how society is rightly ordered and the key to the relationship between politically conservative Christians and contemporary political culture is rooted in the particular way that they understand the origins of America. The American founding is the point of reference against which the present is measured. There is variation here but there are also common themes. There are those who believe that America was founded as a Christian nation. The founders were Christian in conviction or, at least, their sentiments and principles were influenced strongly by Christian faith. The founding political documents therefore reflect a Christian worldview. The institutions

[61] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 111.

> of the early republic, such as schools, charity, hospitals and the like, were Christian in character if not in content, and its morality was Christian.[62]

Some disagree with this straightforward account of America's Christian beginnings, but recognize the active presence of a Judeo-Christian worldview; however, for the Christian Right, those whom Hunter describes as defensive against, this account is crucial: "Not only was it the personal reality of the majority of people, it also provided the motivations for public service, the language of public discourse, and the terms for the long pursuit of public justice."[63] The worldview of the American founding provided a binding structure based on Christian (or Judeo-Christian) morality. This has produced, through the centuries, an unbroken "direct line of reasoning from biblical mandate to public policy recommendation."[64]

Observation of the changes in public opinion toward things such as abortion and gay marriage, and the corresponding policies passed legislatively or as interpreted by the courts on these matters, has led politically conservative Christians to the conclusion that America is, at the very least, going in the wrong direction, or, more pessimistically, no longer the Christian nation it was once thought to have been. As such, the Christian Right constructs a narrative wherein Christians have become the victims. As we saw at the outset of this dissertation, victimhood is an entryway into identity politics. Hunter further explains how the Christian Right views first their various political opponents including the judicial branch of the United States government, and then how they interpret Christian, and indeed religious, standing in light of that:

> in this telling, "these groups {and organizations} are sinister—they use misinformation and fear" to accomplish their agenda. The net effect is not only harm to America but harm to Christians and all people of faith. The net effect is a marginalization of Christians in most spheres of public life. This has been very obvious in politics. One Christian leader declared that "Christians have been under-

[62] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 112–13.

[63] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 113.

[64] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 114.

> represented, ridiculed, and outright ignored by our political leaders for much too long." It is also true in the arts and in entertainment.[65]

Beyond demonstrating the hostile nature of high culture, Hunter goes on to demonstrate how Christians have the same struggles with popular culture: "As to popular culture, it too is hostile to the values that Christians cherish most highly. The world of television and film is especially hostile."[66] Further injury in terms of being ignored or belittled comes from education, particularly on American college campuses. Further, some conservative Christians argue that beyond these challenges, Christians are openly discriminated against, leading to *ressentiment*.

The feelings of *ressentiment* on the Religious Right can be understood as beginning in the 1960s. Robert Putnam's 2010 book, *American Grace,* discusses the way that the American religious landscape has dramatically and drastically changed over the last decades of the 1900s, and into the early 2000s. In chapter four he describes the impetus and reactions of the change which he describes as a shock followed by two aftershocks. Arguing that the 1960s produced the current culture war that Hunter describes, he demonstrates how sweeping the changes were which ultimately led to the polarization we experience today, especially the polarization which frames "secular Left" against "Religious Right." Putnam notes that the "crucial points for our story are, first, that hardly any institution or sector of society was immune from attack, especially youthful attack, and second, that virtually every major theme in the Sixties' controversies would

[65] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 117. In this quote are two quotations that are original to Hunter's text, and associate to endnotes 26 and 27 in Essay 2 Chapter 3, from where I took this quote. Endnote 26 says "Mike Johnson in a conference panel entitled, "The ACLU and Radical Secularism: Driving God from our Public Life." Vision America Conference, War on Christians, Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., 27-28 March 2006." Endnote twenty-seven reads: "(Pat) Robertson, Christian Coalition letter, 1996. Here he also states that "Congress {was} ignoring the concerns of Christian and pro-family voters." The title of the presentation and conference in note twenty-six, and the additional note in twenty-seven serve to demonstrate further the telling of the story of marginalization within the Christian Right perspective.

[66] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 117.

divide Americans for the rest of the century, setting the fuse for the so-called culture wars."[67] He explores the results of this period through the lens of sexual morality, and paints a picture of the liberalization of sexual morality against the authority of God and his church. However, he also notes that many remained spiritual, but opposed to conventional religion: "Some boomers, interested in what they called the 'spiritual,' but disdaining conventional religion, were soon dubbed 'seekers,' looking for new spiritual homes. 'Personalism,' 'situational ethics,' and 'multiple truths' became hot topics in theological debates."[68] In other words, personal spiritual identity was replacing a common or shared religious identity, and the fruits of that decade have produced disparate stories with which individuals view America. We have no shared vision for our shared lives, and because everything has been hyper-politicized our differences define and exacerbate our political lives.

Within the church there was a vacuum of response to the challenges Putnam noted, and the church was not ready or able to articulate a compelling, unified, faithful response, especially when it came to how the church was to relate to the state. Many denominations accommodated the liberalized desires and are comfortable on the left of American politics today. Conservative evangelical denominations had the most lasting response. Putnam notes,

> as religious liberals let a thousand flowers bloom, conservative evangelicals quietly marshaled their forces, and laid the groundwork for their counterattack, as marked, for example, by the expansion of the Campus Crusade for Christ staff from 109 employees in 1960 to 6,500 in the mid–1970s. With the notable exception of evangelical initiatives, few of the religious innovations of the 1960s would survive as significant elements on the American religious scene, but the very diversity of the spiritual menu laid before the seekers was symptomatic of the disarray in conventional American religion.[69]

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[67] Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 91–92.

[68] Putnam, *American Grace*, 96–97.

[69] Putnam, *American Grace*, 97.

When identity politics challenged the church, the church took two political turns, one acquiescing to the agenda of the state; one fighting back against particular issues. The church's answer failed to demonstrate faith in her God, instead showing a people in disarray within her own ranks. The highest values, including those of the church, became optional, even within the church, and as such church members often embraced the normal nihilism of the day. However, within the conservative churches there was a rising call to action to fight back for the ground seemingly lost in the culture.

Hunter identifies two elements of the call to political engagement, "prayer and action."[70] Further, he notes that this call rang out on at least three different levels, the individual, congregational, and political organizational. Noting that the first half, the sincerity of the prayers of the politically conservative Christians, is not questioned, he turns to examining their call to action, by which is meant "'changing the government policies and laws which create an environment in which immorality and parental neglect are allowed to flourish.'"[71] Hunter continues engaging a variety of authors representative of this call to action, and emphasizes their frequent admonition to individual Christians to view voting not as an opportunity to sin but as a theological and moral obligation.

Beyond the individual, local churches are implored that "the call to action means forming congregants through a process of political solicitation."[72] While the efficacy of this call is impossible to ascertain, there is certainly an idealized version of what those churches would look like.

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[70] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 120.

[71] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 120. Here he quotes Gary L. Bauer, letter, Family Research Council, 9 July 1998.

[72] Hunter, *To Change the World,* 122.

> For activists in this movement, the ideal church would be like the West County Assembly of God, a 600-member Evangelical congregation in Missouri. The church's pastor, John A. Wilson, gives sermons that extol the importance of opposing abortion, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage, and he publicly says he supported President Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq. To promote involvement in social issues, the church has a dozen-member "moral action team" that holds open meetings for parishioners each month. They inform church members about socially conservative electoral issues. They register them to vote at stands outside the sanctuary on designated "voter registration" Sundays. During elections, the "moral action team" even drives church members to the polls.[73]

A church can certainly be active in political ways, some of the pastors' sermons do have biblical support for a clear stance on certain issues, and none of the efforts to assist in voting are in-and-of themselves bad. However, a church focused on these ends and improperly conflating presidential decisions on elements of war with things requiring a pastor's public support are at least a warning sign that a church has begun the turn toward the politicization of everything—one of the elements of identity politics.

Having moved from members to congregations, Hunter finally addresses conservative, parachurch political organizations:

> then there are the political organizations themselves. There are dozens of such organizations, some with greater longevity than others. The Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable of the 1980s may have faded from memory, but many others have risen to take their place. Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family Action, Vision America, Priests for Life, Alliance Defense Fund, Liberty Council, the Foundation for Moral Law, Concerned Women for America, America 21, American Center for Law and Justice, Joyce Meyers Ministries, Vision Forum, Faith and Action, Traditional Values Coalition, Renew America, the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ, and Eagle Forum, are just some of the familiar names.[74]

Noting the incomplete nature of the list, which speaks volumes to the prevalence of identity politics in the church, Hunter concludes by noting the variety of these groups, but more

[73] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 122.

[74] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 122.

importantly that they "all are in general sympathy with each other."[75] Each group seeks to gain a prominent place at the table for Christians and their concerns by striving for access to politicians and governmental positions. By turning to politics and making these politically charged goals the highest goal, individuals, churches, and organizations are engaged in identity politics, and have lost the grounding nature of the Christian's identity in Christ.

Hunter moves on to discuss the character of political engagement, and as we consider my offered fourfold lens of analysis, here we see how the turn from Christian identity to identity politics taken by the Christian Right distorts first their ability to relate to their neighbors, specifically those with whom they disagree, and even more damningly their goals for the state. First, Hunter lays bare the clear truth that the Religions Right (with some qualification) is "decidedly partisan on behalf of the Republican Party."[76] There is open recognition from both the Religious Right and the Republican Party of the symbiotic relationship. In the process, Christians are tempted to conflate non-theological political positions such as tax law, foreign policy, climate change, personal liberty, and pandemic response, with theological imperatives such as the sanctity of life and the definition of marriage: "Call it what you will, the intent and net effect is partisan politics. This is only reinforced in those extreme cases when Christian leaders declare that one cannot be a Christian if they vote for the Democratic nominee for president or when priests deny communion for Democrats."[77]

Hunter turns then to the second feature of this turn to politics, which is harmonious with the first: "A second characteristic is the clear desire and ambition for dominance or controlling

[75] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 122.

[76] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 123.

[77] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 124.

influence in American politics and culture."[78] Describing the battle as a new civil or culture war, and with a nostalgic nod to the past, the "desire of all groups on the Christian Right is to ensure that public life is ordered on their terms."[79] The goals for the state become an idealized version of a fully Christian society, one which both never existed and, given the imperfect state of humans, cannot. Further, as not every aspect of human life has a "Christian" imperative, serious concern must be given when the priorities of the Republican Party become moral imperatives within the Christian church. In addition to the temptation of adding political goals to the rule of faith of the Christian church, Christian leaders engaged in this kind of identity politics find another temptation close at hand, namely, the turn to political power and methods over faith and the behaviors that follow from such faith. Hunter notes that at times, the Christian Right sees its agenda backburnered by political necessity, and in response "some of these same leaders go beyond demanding to intimidation and threat. This temptation is greatest not least when the Party establishment fails to conform to the movement's demands and expectations."[80] The hope that Christians place in politics is, as we have seen, unhealthy, unfaithful, and in many ways sinful. Thus, the Christian turn to politics demonstrates an unhealthy view of the neighbor as, primarily, either a political opponent, or a political opportunist. Christians need to look higher than politics for framing an account of political engagement.

The goals of the Christian Right are also concerning to Christians. Regardless of the challenges they face, the one thing which "is never lost in the hurt, the fear, the hostility, and the heat of battle is a longing for an America restored."[81] However, this desire is, as I will argue in

[78] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 124.

[79] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 124.

[80] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 125.

[81] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 127.

chapter four, inappropriate and wrongheaded, not to mention impossible. Hunter does provide a nice analysis of the position, and an extended quote is worth considering.

> The mythic connection between the Christian faith and America is variously understood by conservative Christians, but the link itself is not doubted. The fate of one has been, is, and will be intimately tied to the fate of the other. The bond is strong because each is, in indefinable ways, constitutive of the other. It is not surprising then, that they are often conflated, such that Christian faith and national identity are fused together in political imagination. This particular alliance has evolved in such a way as to forge a strong connection to the agenda of a political party where the interests of one become wedded to the interests of the other. Republican Party officials and conservative Christian leaders instrumentalize and leverage each other's power to serve shared ends, though it is clear which side has the better deal. This is why conservative Christians are often called the "useful idiots of the Republican party."[82]

Those who wear the baptismal garment of the King of the Universe should strive to be better than useful idiots. Thus far Hunter's analysis of the Christian Right as the leading edge of the "defensive against" model.

Another author contributes an incisive look into the working of the politically conservative expression of Christianity. James Gilmore's 2017 dissertation, "I Love To Tell The Stor(ies): Narrative Construction In The Christian Right," examines two narratives and how they have impacted the American Christian Right. The two narratives are the Cosmic and American, the former focusing on the biblical worldview, the latter on the presupposition that America is a special nation chosen by God. Working with Neil J. Young's book *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics*,[83] Gilmore writes:

> Young identifies one particular incident as a major crystallization point in creating consubstantiality between the evangelical-dominated Christian Right, Catholics, and Mormons: the 2008 backlash by LGBT rights activists against the LDS church in the wake of California voters' approval of Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage…Protest rallies emerged outside LDS temples across the country, from

[82] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 128.

[83] Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

> Temple Square in downtown Salt Lake City to the LDS temple on New York City's Upper West Side. The vehement protests from supporters of LGBT rights garnered sympathy for the LDS Church from both evangelical and Catholic opponents of same-sex marriage—including prominent figures in the Christian Right like Chuck Colson, James Dobson, and Tony Perkins.[84]

He continues,

> According to Young, this was a moment of real solidarity between evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons that enabled the Christian Right to reconfigure the outward border of political ecumenism, as evangelicals and Catholics were able to identify with what they characterized as the victimization of Mormons for standing up for their beliefs about marriage. In this consubstantial vision, Young writes, they formed an alliance not around shared politics (as previous attempts, including the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, had tried) or shared theology, but rather around the threat posed by liberals to their religious liberty—a sort of shared victimage, where each group saw in the other the potential that if they did not all hang together, they all might hang separately at the hands of secular liberals.[85]

Gilmore's words echo Lilla's critiques of the American Left discussed in my second chapter, but here Gilmore is talking about the political face of the conservative, or fundamentalist, part of the American church. While it may seem at first that the coalition of the varied groups is a good thing, portending some kind of foundation that can be used to bring disparate groups together, the reality is that these associations of convenience are arguably less than helpful. Lilla calls them "marriages of convenience."[86]

Marriages of convenience are really not marriages at all, but simply groups temporarily uniting for some common-felt purpose, and with the end of the marriage already in mind. This aspect of identity politics driven political engagement is particularly worrisome for the church to engage in for many reasons, including the incidental attributions that a particular association may bring, the potential for compromising God's revealed will (or misapplying the same, for that

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[84] James Gilmore, "I Love To Tell The Stor(ies): Narrative Construction in the Christian Right" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2017), 410–11, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[85] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 411.

[86] Lilla, *Once and Future Liberal,* 89.

matter), and primarily the potential for devaluating God either by making him another piece of the political debate, or by demonstrating that we are finally pragmatists more than believers. The church must exercise an extreme abundance of caution in entering into any political coalition, so that we do not end up giving the false witness that God's church is equal to any other religion that the state identifies as such.

Gilmore's critiques also affirm much of what Hunter has already spelled out in this section. First, Hunter points out that what Gilmore describes has "become the distinguishing characteristic of politics in modern cultures,"[87] specifically, *ressentiment* cultivated by a shared sense of being wronged by those with power, whether it is rightly sensed or not. Second, Gilmore affirms Hunter when the latter notes that striving to change the world is wrong for Christians because it makes false assumptions about the ability of individuals or groups to actually change the world, and because it gets the goals of the Christian life backwards. In a critique against those who would try to change the world, Hunter says:

> This idea continues to be championed by some of the most prominent leaders in American Christianity. The logic that follows is dangerous indeed: once we have determined the right course of history, everything is subordinate to it—nearly any action can be justified if it helps to put the society on course and keeps it going in the right direction.[88]

Yet for Christians, Hunter argues, this puts what matters most in secondary position, as if humans are simply attempting to use God to gain their own kingdom.

> The question is wrong because, for Christians, it makes the primary subservient to the secondary. By making a certain understanding of the good in society the objective, the source of the good—God himself and the intimacy he offers—becomes nothing more than a tool to be used to achieve that objective. When this happens, righteousness can quickly become cruelty and justice can rapidly turn into injustice. Indeed, history is filled with the bloody consequences of this logic and the logic is

[87] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.

[88] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 285.

> very much present, even if implicit, on all sides and in all factions of the ongoing culture war.[89]

This logic is guaranteed to continue to produce "useful idiots" rather than provide real, substantive, Christian engagement of the state. The powerful weaving of these two narratives, in Gilmore's explanation, demonstrates that the "Christian" Right in reality functions much the same way as the secular left was critiqued by Lilla for doing—that is, as an ad hoc group of victims with no explicit shared story. Gilmore's narratives will play a central part in my analysis of the core convictions and identity of representatives of the "defensive against" position.

The core convictions of those embracing a "defensive against" mindset are most clearly seen in the two narratives that Gilmore identifies, the Cosmic and the American, and he defines both in great detail in chapter two of his dissertation. Of the Cosmic Narrative, Gilmore says it "is one of a vast battle between the forces of good (led by God) and the forces of evil (led by Satan)."[90] While some aspects of the narrative are not universal among the Christian Right (such as premillennial dispensationalism, a teaching Lutherans do not hold although some find much theological agreement with politically conservative Christians), "those who espouse it [the Cosmic Narrative] tend to be theologically-conservative Protestants from the fundamentalist or evangelical traditions."[91] Specific to the core convictions, Gilmore argues that

> The Christian Bible is seen as the foundational text laying out the terms and characters; Christians see the current era as one chapter in a great cosmic story, whose beginning is the Creation and Fall of humanity and whose ending is the descent of the world into chaos followed by the great cosmic and cataclysmic battle of the Apocalypse, in which God finally triumphs over Satan and inaugurates the eternal heavenly Kingdom for all true Christians to inhabit. This long struggle, which extends literally from the beginning of time to its end, is seen in terms of ongoing "spiritual warfare" (a concept from Paul's letter to the Ephesians) with God and God's followers (including angels) on one side, and Satan and Satan's followers

[89] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 285.

[90] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 85.

[91] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 85.

> (including demons) on the other. However, it is important to note that despite the frame of a "battle," there is no point where the outcome is anything less than certain; God remains in control of the whole narrative, including deciding when God will win the final victory over Satan.[92]

In sketching the core convictions through the biblical narrative, Gilmore offers an honest assessment of the story for what it is, but highlights two specific features of the story surrounding the person and life of Jesus as crucial to the narrative. The first is "that the religious and political leaders are characterized as threatened by Jesus and Jesus's message,"[93] which has the effect of forming Jesus's followers to expect persecution, and find such as evidence of faithfulness. The second point he makes is that

> perhaps most importantly, the miracles Jesus performs throughout the narrative—healings, mass feedings, casting out demons, and supernatural acts like walking on water—are significant in that they are seen as proof that Jesus is who he says he is. The historicity of the Gospels—in which they are seen as being just as historically and literally true as any other account of history, if not even more so due to their divine authorship and inerrancy—is an essential component of this narrative's potency among the Christian Right; to them, everything laid out in the Gospels actually happened in Palestine during the first half of the first century of the common era, and these miracles are just as historically certain as any more mundane event from that era that is assumed to be historically true by the rest of the world (like Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE)."[94]

Thus, the Christian Right holds to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and formulates its worldview accordingly.

But there is one more aspect to this literal interpretation that has proved to be important for constructing the "defensive against" model that Hunter describes, and that is the role of eschatology, specifically premillennial eschatology. In Gilmore's Cosmic Narrative, the conversion of Constantine and the unification of the church and state had the effect of distorting

[92] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 86.

[93] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 91.

[94] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 91.

the "true" view of eschatology, which was only finally rediscovered in the American Religious Right soil.

> Prior to Constantine, Christians were largely premillennial in their eschatology, seeing the imperial structure as irredeemable in its persecution of Christ's chosen, ready to be wiped off the face of the earth with Christ's sudden and unexpected second coming. However, when church and state united under Constantine, the idea of Rome as a hostile enemy of God obviously could not be maintained: thus, the Cosmic Narrative suggests, Christian eschatology shifted from a literal interpretation of Scripture's End Times prophecies to an allegorical interpretation, culminating in Augustine's doctrine of amillennialism—that the millennium prophesied by the Bible was a symbol for the age of the church.[95]

From the Cosmic Narrative's perspective, the corruption of the Western Church began to occur until eventually the Reformation was able to arrest the decline. The Reformation emphasis on individual salvation, coupled with access to the Scripture, according to some eschatologically-minded rhetors of the Cosmic Narrative such as Tim LaHaye, was "the beginning of the recovery of premillennial eschatology."[96] Premillennial interest was renewed in the nineteenth century, and has ever since captured the minds of many in America through both churches and works of fiction such as the LaHaye's *Left Behind* series. The coupling of spiritual warfare and premillennial eschatology only intensifies the need for mounting a defense against Satan and his sympathizers.

This is, however, only one of the two narratives that Gilmore argues constitutes the "defensive against" believers' core convictions. The other narrative, the Christian Nation one, is the historical narrative of the United States, the American Narrative.

> Europeans who came to North American were guided there by God and charged with the founding of a Christian nation. The founders of the country, steeped in this ethos, were inspired by God on some level to write the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution based on Protestant Christian ideals and with the intention that the nation remain Christian in character. However, as the nation's history progressed—

[95] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 94.

[96] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 95.

> and particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century—secular humanists, who sought to separate religion and morality from government, took over cultural institutions and indoctrinated Americans into abandoning Christian morality and government, leading to massive social chaos and decline.[97]

While the results of the Cosmic Narrative are certain,

> the American Narrative is left open-ended; either Christians will retake the nation, spark a national revival, and return America to God's values and prosperity, or the nation will continue along its moral decline until it collapses (either naturally as a result of its sins, or supernaturally by God's wrath) or the world ends.

Adding this second story to the core convictions formed by Scripture finally allows us to see how the dual imperative of spiritual warfare and premillennial eschatology takes on political flesh, thus nesting the Christian Nation Narrative within the Cosmic one. A Bible-believing Christian who believes that there is a spiritual battle being played out among us, that God is a God of strict judgment, that the nature of American politics (often termed as the fight for the soul of America) is an important aspect of that battle, and that the Christian side has been losing that battle of late, will find himself in prime position to turn to *ressentiment*, the moralizing revenge of the powerless.

An illustration of this temptation is seen as Gilmore pays special attention to the placing of slavery and abortion together as national sins particularly linked in the Christian Right's rhetoric. As expected, the response is couched in defensive language such as when "[John] Whitehead joins [Francis] Schaeffer in suggesting that abortion is the ultimate sign of the moral degradation wrought by secular humanism and the acceptance of nonbiblical, non-absolute moral standards."[98] The Christian Right, believing itself morally correct according to the Cosmic Narrative, yet politically and culturally opposed according to the American Narrative, finds

[97] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 97.

[98] Gilmore, "I Love To Tell the Stor(ies)," 125.

ressentiment as a temptation in regards to abortion. The same can be seen in battles around human sexuality, whether dealing with homosexuality, pornography or prostitution. As the culture becomes more tolerant of these things the church's doctrine opposes, the church, feeling powerless and morally righteous, is tempted to engage politics from a position defined by *ressentiment*. Thus the core convictions of the "defensive against" camp open the door for identity politics. The question is whether identity, relationship to the neighbors, and goals follow this line of thinking.

It is now time to explore the identity of the "defensive against" camp. Gilmore is helpful here as well, as he defines Christian Right identity first in terms of the locus of identity, and second in terms of its circumference. In doing so, he notes how both the Cosmic and American narratives shape each other, and often times how they produce narratives which run counter to each other. The primary example of this paradoxical relationship is the conviction that in the Cosmic Narrative, the Christian Right is composed only of the true believers, those who have accepted Jesus, and display their faith; while at the same time, holding to the conviction in the American Narrative that a true Christian nation is possible. Thus, Gilmore notes that "within the confines of the church, the Cosmic Narrative suggests, there are many who will not be saved because they have not truly had a personal salvation experience."[99] However, the Christian Right, through the American Narrative, also holds that

> not only is a "Christian nation" possible, but that it has indeed happened in the history of the United States. This vision of religious identity has communal and national qualities. In this vision, the United States, as a people combining Christian piety and a Protestant work ethic with republican and free-market values, can be a beacon of prosperity and hope to the world—and the *true* American community, as the

[99] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 259–60.

> protagonists of the narrative, are those who understand and share that vision for the country.[100]

Thus, the locus of religious identity differs between the Cosmic and American Narratives, but "they do both hold out a model of collective identity in some form."[101]

Having examined the loci of their identity, Gilmore next focuses on what he calls the circumference of the Christian Right's identity, or the grounds for their engagement. In the Cosmic Narrative, Gilmore argues that the Christian Right sees its identity as that of a persecuted group, using a New Testament model of bifurcation which pits church against world.[102] Further, the Christian Right willingly casts itself as persecuted, through both overt attacks and perceived microaggressions such as blasphemy in the media, ultimately "linking the plight of ridiculed Christians in the United States to that of Jews in Nazi Germany in the years prior to Hitler's Final Solution,"[103] thus presenting "evangelical Christians not only as a minority but as a minority on par with Israel, God's chosen people."[104]

Yet again, Gilmore casts the Cosmic and American Narratives as running contrary to each other, but also as being used in a rhetorical way to expand the circumference of its identity as a persecuted group. The American Narrative assumes that "when left to their own devices and freed from any kind of corrupt outside influences…Americans are a basically godly and virtuous people who would choose righteousness for themselves and their families and limited government to protect them from evil abroad."[105] Significantly, Gilmore argues that this

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[100] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 260.

[101] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 263.

[102] Gilmore gives the example of James 4:4 "which states that 'friendship with the world means enmity against God.'" Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 264.

[103] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 267.

[104] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 267.

[105] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 270–71.

understanding is rooted not in theological concerns, such as original sin which the Christian Right does not deny, but rather in a white, middle-class, romanticized version of the Puritan's worldview, or "American exceptionalism, and particularly the American Narrative's presentation of American history as rooted in the Puritan vision for the world."[106] The Christian Right is able to cast a vision wherein American people are being led astray by evil shepherds. Gilmore summarizes the circumference of the political identity of the Christian right as a persecuted flock, and both prayer and action (as identified above by Hunter) play starring roles in such a vision:

> Americans are still characterized as basically good people who have gone wrong by failing to defend themselves, rather than basically fallen and sinful people who cannot defend themselves against the demonic onslaught without divine assistance. The solution, therefore, is not merely to pray that God blesses the nation with spiritual revival—though that is certainly a necessary component of the solution—but rather to take *action* in culture by supporting and voting for pro-moral candidates, taking part in cultural activism to stem the tide of pornography, profanity, and blasphemy, or working to retake their public schools and other public institutions for family values.[107]

Finally, Gilmore indicates how these two narratives are able to form the Christian Right's identity as defense against the "other."

> By standing in polar opposition and enmity to the evangelical Christian patriotic faith (at least as the Christian Right presents them), "secular humanists" and other liberal "others" clearly function in an identity-forming capacity, giving Christian Right rhetors the tools they need to navigate the potentially-conflicting visions of identity laid out in the Cosmic and American Narratives and generate a vision of identity that draws strength from, rather than weakening under, the apparent contradictions.[108]

Since the core convictions of the Christian Right include both of these narratives, so too is their identity formed in militaristic terms, ready to defend and even attack on behalf of God. In a

[106] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 272.

[107] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 274.

[108] Gilmore, "I Love to Tell the Stor(ies)," 340.

sense, the Christian Right can be identified as Christian soldiers, ready to do battle in the name of God.

Gilmore's analysis of the core conviction and identity-forming narratives of the Christian Right leads to the conclusion that the two are often fused into one-and-the-same narrative for those who hold to a "defensive against" model of the church's engagement in the world. Hunter agrees:

> The mythic connection between the Christian faith and America is variously understood by conservative Christians, but the link itself is not doubted. The fate of one has been, is, and will be intimately tied to the fate of the other. The bond is strong because each is, in indefinable ways, constitutive of the other. It is not surprising then, that they are often conflated, such that Christian faith and national identity are fused together in political imagination.[109]

Thus, within the "defensive against" model, a litmus test (or better, a series of litmus tests based on the prevailing issues of the day) is developed as a test of sincere faith. "Does your political action give witness to your theological beliefs?" The codependency of God's greater story and America's moral destiny lend the weight of eternity to every political situation. Indeed, everything becomes politicized in this identity.

Based off of this identity identified by Gilmore, we now turn to the relationship between the Christian Right and their neighbors/others who are fellow residents of the United States. As all of the authors we have looked at so far note, the relationship is understood in terms of battle, with the church (and her particular understanding of America) fighting against various enemies including the devil and (or better yet, in) secular progressivism. As an example of such engagement with neighbors, Hunter quotes at length from a video released by a group called Reclaiming the 7 Mountains of Culture, a quote I will replicate here.

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[109] Hunter, *To Chang the World*, 128.

> In every city of the world, an unseen battle rages for dominion over God's creation and the souls of the people. This battle is fought on seven strategic fronts, looming like mountains over the culture to shape and influence its destiny. Over the years the church slowly retreated from its place of influence on these mountains leaving a void now filled with darkness. When we lose our influence we lose the culture and when we lose the culture we fail to advance the kingdom of God. And now a generation stands in desperate need. It's time to fight for them and take back the mountains of influence.
>
> The mountain of government where evil is either restrained or endorsed. The mountain of education where truths or lies about God and His creation are taught. The mountain of media where information is interpreted through the lens of good or evil. The mountain of arts and entertainment where values and virtue are celebrated or distorted. The mountain of religion where people worship God in spirit and truth or settle for a religious ritual. The mountain of family where either the blessing or a curse is passed on to successive generations. And the one mountain they depend on. The mountain which fuels and funds all the other mountains. The mountain of business where people build for the glory of God or the glory of man. Where resources are consecrated for the kingdom of God or captured for the powers of darkness. Those who lead this mountain control what influences our culture.
>
> The last fifty years we have seen the most rapids moral decline in history. The culture we inherited from our forefathers is disintegrating before our eyes. What kind of world are we leaving for our children and grandchildren?[110]

This attitude is to be expected from the mingling of the Cosmic and American Narratives, especially as one considers the very sincere concerns of the Christian Right. Seeing political engagement as the battleground for those "on God's side" and those "opposed to God" renders a point of view that cannot be hospitable, or civil, to those whose political disagreement renders them morally apostate and about whom many leaders of the Christian Right have no problem disparaging in politically-charged, power-seeking rhetoric.

Finally, in terms of goals for the state, we have already seen that the goal of the defensive approach is finally the transformation of America into a nation which fully embraces the moral code of the church, combined with other characteristics such as a so-called Protestant work ethic,

[110] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 129–30. See video "Reclaiming the 7 Mountains of Culture," www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQtB-AF41p8.

republican and free-market values, and the like as noted in our discussion of the identity of the Christian Right, specifically in Gilmore's work. In the approach of the Christian Right, Hunter notes how "one sees again the well-meaning hope to make the world a better place."[111] But while the goal is noble, it is also troubling in Hunter's estimation because all of their initiatives are led by negation, so they continue "to reflect the same language of loss, disappointment, anger, antipathy, resentment, and desire for conquest."[112] Thus, for Hunter, the Christian Right is unable to present an account that is able to produce the results they want, and they are unwilling and unable to conceive of an alternative way to faithfully engage the state, primarily because the myth that is behind their engagement is too prevalent: "This is because the underlying myth that defines their identity, their goals, and their strategy of action has not changed. The myth continues to shape the language, the logic, and the script for their engagement with culture."[113]

To summarize the "defensive against" understanding of the Christian Right, their core convictions are formed by the fusing of two particular narratives, which Gilmore identifies as the Cosmic (the understanding of the work of God as a battle with Satan as revealed in the Bible) and the American (a myth based on the Puritan foundation of America through which a special relationship between God and America is believed to exist). Although these two narratives sometimes run contrary to each other in their logic, their conflation is actually used by the Christian Right to further their claim of fidelity, and to argue that the decline of America is more acute and problematic. The identity of the Christian Right is formed by both of these core convictions, and the rhetors see themselves as those charged with identifying the appropriate Christian position on each political issue based on an alignment of the two narratives. The

[111] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 131.

[112] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 131.

[113] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 131.

singular option presented is laid out in such a way that it is a moral obligation to agree and act upon it, otherwise the faith of the individual may be questioned. Further, in terms of relationship to the neighbor other, the Christian fully encouraged to prayer and action will view those who disagree with him as his opponent, and in the process as standing against God and the foundation upon which America was built. Finally, the call to action in both prayer and civil activism, primarily political action on behalf of the Republican Party, is believed to accomplish, ultimately, the restoration and transformation of America necessary to bring about God's eschatological reign in a premillennial understanding.

Having thus sketched the Christian Right as an embodiment of the "defensive against" model, it is time to answer the two questions I proposed earlier to demonstrate whether engagement in this way could accommodate the turn to identity politics. First, does their engagement fit the definition including the necessary aspects of *ressentiment*, an understanding of marginalization, and the desire to bring about correctives according to this perceived identity? The answer to this question is clearly yes. The role of *ressentiment* has been evident throughout the sketching out of their position. Similarly, the role of the *feeling* of marginalization is quite prevalent, especially felt acutely when, as Gilmore noted, the Christian Right attempts to correlate themselves to historically marginalized and persecuted groups such as the Jews prior to the Holocaust. Quite ironically, the Christian Right, in worrying about its own potential persecution, often turns a blind eye to the very neighbor who is persecuted or marginalized, such as refugees and immigrants who are instead derided for their cultural differences, religious backgrounds, or potential liabilities to the nation. The ability to engage fruitfully in public discourse is lost. Finally, in terms of seeking correctives, the Christian Right has made seeking to put America on a corrected path through a spiritual and cultural reawakening the primary goal of

its existence, putting political goals on par with, or even above, the highest goal of the church, which is the proclamation of the message of salvation in Christ.

Relevance To

The second group that Hunter identifies is the group he titles "relevance to." This group historically was embraced by theological liberalism, but is now embraced by others as well, including some Evangelicals (Hunter notes the attraction for the "seeker-church" and "emerging church" movements in particular), and progressive Roman Catholics. In describing the shape of this paradigm, especially concerning the leadership in theological liberalism, Hunter notes that they "long believed that the only way to remain relevant was to resymbolize Christianity in ways that more or less reflected the epistemological and moral assumptions of romantic modernism."[114] In this way, it is believed, the church is able to offer theological construction upon cultural issues, which becomes the priority of this model of engagement. In opposition to the "defensive against" crowd, "who prioritize distinctiveness through self-conscious continuity with Christian orthodoxy of the past, those in the "relevance to" paradigm make a priority of being connected to the pressing issues of the day."[115]

Hunter notes another aspect of this engagement which is important for us to notice as well, and that is a connection between church and state, specifically American culture.

> And yet, theological liberalism, like its conservative counterpart, was also bound by a proprietarian relationship toward American culture, though in ways that were more ethical than spiritual, more oriented toward social amelioration than theological purity. Indeed, from the end of the nineteenth century and beyond the middle of the twentieth, those Christians operating in this paradigm were relevant to the most contentious issues of the moment—child labor, the labor movement, Communism, the war in Vietnam, and above all, the civil rights movement. At present, old-fashioned liberals continue to hold the view that corporate capitalism is the heart of

[114] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

[115] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215.

> the problem with the modern world not just for the savage inequalities it creates but for the ways in which capitalism despoils the environment, disturbs local economies, harms local communities, and distorts human values.[116]

Where the "defensive against" paradigm is committed to American Exceptionalism (including the promises of capitalism) in its form of cultural engagement, the "relevance to" paradigm is committed to the promises of liberalism (the philosophical idea) through liberalism (the political agenda). The reader will recall Mark Lilla's descriptions of the two dispensations which produced two unique understandings of the self, one economic and one feeling. The economic self finds a home in the "defensive against" paradigm while the feeling self finds a home in the "relevance to" paradigm. In other words, both selves find a place in Christian political engagement.

There is some variety to be found in the "relevance to" paradigm in terms of entry points to engagement. Rather than resymbolizing the church, for instance, Evangelicals who maintain the theological orthodoxy seek conversations with the culture by which they can provide a witness: "As with liberation theologies, a priority is given to praxis and from praxis emerges a conversation with the creeds of the church."[117] Those in the "relevant to" crowd are thus not denying the truths of the faith, neither are they leading with the sword as if on a military campaign, with the goals that this engagement will provide fruitful conversations and, ultimately, a new and more relevant vision of the church—even if the doctrine remains: "the main point of reference in defining itself as a movement and its main focus of critique is not contemporary culture but the established church."[118] For those in this camp, the vilification of the church by culture can be addressed by means of rebranding the church, rather than anticipating the hostility

[116] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 215–16.

[117] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 216.

[118] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 216.

on account of the faith, and thereby seeing the persecution as a sign of true faith, like those in the "defensive against" paradigm did. As the church has left the culture behind, it is time for the church to listen to the culture to learn who she is.

The leading public edge of the "relevance to" paradigm is the Christian Left. By engaging Hunter's chapter on the Christian Left we will be able to discern the answers to the questions of identity politics engagement, namely, does it fit the definition (*ressentiment*, marginalization, the offering of correctives), and how if behaves in regards to the four problems laid out in our fourfold lens of analysis (core convictions, identity, relationship to others, and goals for the state). Hunter begins with a description of the political disposition of the Christian Left:

> Like politically conservative Christians, politically progressive Christians also are defined by and operate within a reading of myth and history. If conservatives are animated by a mythic ideal of the right ordering of society, and thus see modern history as a decline from order to disorder, progressives have always been animated by the myth of equality and community and therefore see history as an ongoing struggle to realize these ideals.[119]

Further, Hunter demonstrates that there are elements of progressive politics that can be found throughout church history, including ones that "can be found in St. Augustine's *City of God*, the Waldensians of the twelfth century, St. Francis and the Franciscans in the early thirteenth century, and St. Thomas More's sixteenth-century masterpiece *Utopia*, among other places."[120] However the progressive politics of today is unique in its particularity because of its genesis in the Enlightenment. There are three particular ideals which are upheld: "liberty, equality, and fraternity,"[121] and the "key word in the progressive lexicon, and arguably the paramount virtue, is justice."[122] Importantly, however, this definition of justice is primarily tied to economics, as if

[119] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 132.

[120] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 132.

[121] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 132.

[122] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 132.

that is the highest good, and specifically to economic equity which comprises the economic ideal.

The first ideal listed is liberty, which as I have noted is held by all groups, though in extremely varied ways. In my second chapter, I demonstrated with Patrick Deneen how that word has been redefined in liberalism, and earlier in this chapter, I noted that religious liberty is a large component of the Christian Right's narrative, ultimately flowing from their feelings of *ressentiment* against their perception of being marginalized by a liberal society. Within the progressive camp, however, there is confusion over the definition of liberty between the secular and religious progressives.

> In contemporary America, most secular progressives define the "liberty" component in terms of individual autonomy and the freedom to choose one's own lifestyle; that is, in terms of sexual identity and practice, relationships, entertainment, and so on. But religiously oriented progressives, Christians among them, tend to lean toward the communitarian side of this divide. For these, liberty is understood largely as liberation; often enough this means freedom for individuals and communities from poverty caused by economic domination and exploitation of the wealthy.[123]

Thus liberty, for the American Christian Left, is something obtained through economic means.

The final ideal, fraternity, "is the idea of solidarity among equals—across the boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class."[124] Thus for the Christian Left, there is a sense of humility and equality before the world, "relevance to," that is often lost in the Christian Right's "defensive against" position. That each person is equally important to the Creator is certainly a biblical position, and in that regard this humility serves a good witness. Challenges to this position come in a variety of ways, the questioning of orthodox beliefs being one which comes from the Christian Right. Tying or reducing the Christian message mainly to

[123] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 133.

[124] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 133.

economic (or other political) concerns is another challenge directed against the Christian Left (although also against the Christian Right). In the Christian Left, Hunter notes, even "the hope of peace is a related virtue among politically progressive Christians, not incidentally because war, historically, is often waged by the rich and privileged as a means of defending or even expanding their power, wealth, and social advantage."[125]

The Christian Left uses two traditions to frame their story and engagement. One is the biblical tradition where one finds the "condemnation of the wealthy for their abuse of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized,"[126] and another is the future vision of the *eschaton* as "the realization of the kingdom of heaven, where justice, peace, equality, and community exist in their ultimate state of perfection."[127] Realizing that goal on earth is the motivation for progressive Christians. As the Christian Right has its moments and chosen plots in forming its narrative, so does the Christian Left have its moments for framing its narrative.

> For politically progressive Christians, the salient movements of American history are abolition, women's suffrage, the female seminary movement, child labor reform, the programs of social relief in the Social Gospel movement, the peace movement before World War I, desegregation and the civil rights movement, and the war against Vietnam. The heroic figures of this political tradition are exemplars of these struggles—Frederick Douglass, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Oscar Romero and so on.[128]

Thus it is not surprising that the Christian Left found itself in a very favorable position in the mid-twentieth century advocating for such left-of-center issues as civil rights, public education, ecological justice, and general liberation movements; and against the war in Vietnam and nuclear proliferation. In this way, the various Christian Left "bodies also cultivated the presumption that

[125] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 133.

[126] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 133.

[127] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 134.

[128] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 134.

their particular agenda represented *the* Christian voice in public affairs."[129] Outside of the United States, liberation theology boomed, especially in Latin America, though its popular prominence has declined in the United States in recent decades, it maintains a hold in some intellectual sectors. Liberation theology interprets

> The Christian faith through the suffering, struggle and hope of the poor, and the person of Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed. In its more extreme expressions, it privileged orthopraxy or practice rooted in a political interpretation of the Gospels over orthodoxy or proper belief. In this way it became closely aligned with Marxist ideology and even various communist movements in their call to arms against oppressive regimes around the Third World.[130]

This initial wave of activism has largely disappeared from American public life since the 1980s.

What has replaced it, however, is a new Christian Left dominated by the Evangelical turn to praxis engagement, and which is part of, and has strong affinities with the rest of, the "spiritual Left." One notices the change: for a while, there was one side that claimed it was the orthodox voice of Christian political engagement, the Christian Left from the 1960s-80s. Since then the voice of the Christian Right began to dominate, and in Hunter's estimation, the Christian Left is beginning a renewal of its voice according to its core convictions, that is: through praxis work attendant to the biblical call for justice, and demonstrated through liberty, equality, and, fraternity, from which conversation with the Christian creeds and Scripture may take place.

For the Christian Left, the role of the church continues to be advocating on behalf of those who are disadvantaged in society. Quite often this puts them at direct odds with the Christian Right whom the Left believes brings about harm via its preferred political policies. As their ethic of equity would demand, "the disadvantaged includes women, gays, minorities, immigrants, and the poor but it is the more embracing category of poverty that has animated Evangelical

[129] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 134.

[130] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 135.

progressives more than anything else."[131] Immediately the challenge of maintaining orthodoxy, the Christian Right's priority, puts the Christian Left and Right at odds with each other in regards to dealing with issues such as gay rights and, as Leopoldo Sánchez will speak to later, immigration (especially when the legality of the immigrant's status comes into play). Exacerbating the divide is the belief, on both sides, that their group holds the moral and theological high ground, while the other side is on untenable footing for church-state engagement. The rationale for this belief is grounded in the core convictions of each group.

Having thus examined the core convictions of the Christian Left, it is now time to examine what constitutes their identity, that is, how do they see themselves as defined by their core convictions? Two aspects help us understand the identity of the Christian Left: first, the Christian Left sees itself as the true expression of the church, and thus defines itself in opposition to the Christian Right whom they view as having perverted the Gospel through association with the Republican party, again mostly based on an economic agenda. Second, whether theologically liberal or not, a member of the Christian Left is in agreement with liberal political goals, specifically from an economic position, though those goals permeate all other positions because of the concept of justice/injustice being linked so tightly to economic standing. In the process, they see themselves as a more wholistic approach to the project of liberalism (by providing a theological basis for social change) than the secular Left alone provides, and yet, as people of faith, people whom the secular Left fails to take seriously.

Though they may be neglected by their political bedfellows, the Christian Left certainly feels a sense of comradery with the secular Left when it comes to their common opponent: the Christian Right. "For all of the diversity one can find among progressives, one of the central

[131] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 138.

catalysts of solidarity over the years has been their hostility to the leaders, organizations, ideology, and agenda of the Christian Right."[132] Hunter notes that there is a wax and wane in the relationship between the two, the more the Christian Right increases, the more the Christian Left's antipathy does as well, and as the strength of the Christian Right decreases, so does the antipathy of the Left for the Right. However, the Christian Left is fairly constant in its aversion to Christian conservatism.[133] Arguing that the Christian Right has too narrow a view on issues, and functions as tools of the Republican party by casting Jesus as pro-rich, pro-war, pro-American, and tying Jesus's name to tax cuts or armed conflicts, the Christian Left believes that "the Christian Right has harmed the faith by not representing Christianity fairly."[134] Further, there is a belief that the work of the Christian Right from the time of the late 1970s was a takeover of American evangelicalism which, to evangelicals on the Left, is abhorrent.

> Randall Balmer elaborates the point, mincing no words. In his view, the evangelical faith has been "hijacked" and "bastardized" by the Christian Right. The effect is a "distortion of the faith" and of "the teachings of Jesus." Their method is "the ruse of selective literalism;" in effect, a process by which "they wrench passages out of context and offer pinched, literalistic interpretations…that diminish the scriptures by robbing them of their larger meaning." The preachers of the Christian Right "have led their sheep astray from the gospel of Jesus Christ to the false gospel of neoconservative ideology and into the maw of the Republican Party." By so doing, they have "compromised the faith," turning it into "something less than the best of Christianity."[135]

The Christian Left views the Christian Right as furthering unjust policies, and in the process missing the biblical call to justice which, serving the Left as a core conviction, thus causes "deep

[132] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 139.

[133] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 140.

[134] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 140.

[135] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 140. In this quote, most of the quotations point are places where Hunter footnotes direct quotes from Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

anger and antipathy among many Christian progressives about this entire state of affairs."[136] Indeed, the Left views America as increasingly unjust and unequal, and argues that "the Christian Right has legitimated these inequalities of power and wealth"[137] through their connections to the Republican agenda.

Continuing his engagement with Randall Balmer, Hunter demonstrates that the Christian Left's view of the Christian Right's facilitation of economic injustice serves as a form of *ressentiment* for the Christian Left. For the Christian Left, there is often an ostracization which happens from the Christian Right, normally because the Right is questioning the validity of the faith of individuals on the left. Further, and more to the point, this ostracization can take very powerful turns as the Christian Right tends to control the agenda of Evangelical churches and their organizations. This ostracization serves as a formative narrative[138] for those on the Christian Left, and it causes them to respond with "the moralizing revenge of the powerless." Balmer's revenge is expressed in irony as he engages in the exact behavior he is attacking.

> His disdain for the Christian Right leads him to engage in name-calling that is as one-dimensional and dehumanizing as the most extreme voices of the Christian Right, labeling his opponents "right-wing zealots" and "bullies" and their followers "minion," who together are "intolerant," "vicious," "militaristic," "bloviating," and theocratic. In this regard, his perspective also matches the Manichaeism of the most extreme voices of the Christian Right for there is no shade or nuance in his description of the political realities with which he is wrestling. The Christian Right is monolithic and it is bad. Liberals, by contrast, are good.[139]

Thus the Christian Left has engaged in a battle against the Christian Right, with the goal of redefining the church in the public's eye. Hunter writes: "No one doubts the sincerity of their motives or the high-mindedness of the cause. There is also no doubt that underlying the call to

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[136] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 141.

[137] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 141.

[138] See Hunter's introduction to, and the lengthy quote from Balmer, Hunter, *To Change the World*, 141–42.

[139] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 141.

'take back' the faith and nation is a basic will to power that is not unlike what one finds within the Christian Right."[140]

To this end, Hunter theorizes that the Christian Left's self-definition is one of seeking power where they believe they should have it. Because the Christian Left is "as certain as their conservative counterparts that they are on the side of good,"[141] and they "also believe that they are smarter and more sophisticated than"[142] them, "the larger complaint of politically progressive Christians has to do with their own eclipse from the realm of power."[143] By understanding themselves as opposed to the Christian Right, the Christian Left indeed sees things in a similar vein to the Christian Right—only with the Christian Right as the primary opponent, rather than the secular humanism or liberalism that the Christian Right opposes. By believing the Christian Right to be wholly unconcerned with justice, especially economic justice for the marginalized, the Christian Left thus identifies itself as the true political expression of the church. But it is still a unique political expression, and that identity is formed by a particular reading of the Bible combined with a commitment to social justice.

This commitment to social justice, or its link to liberal political goals, is the second aspect of the Christian Left's identity that we need to consider. Hunter demonstrates the solidarity between the Democratic Party and the Christian Left with the important caveat of the disagreement in abortion. Looking at the activism of Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo, Hunter demonstrates that for the Christian Left, the "ultimate goal, then is to create a more just world. What this means, of course, is to give appropriate attention to the needs of the poor. But how?

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[140] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144.

[141] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 143.

[142] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 143.

[143] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 143.

Through politics."[144] This is the call to action, and this call to action became the "Matthew 25 Network" political action committee, which "was created formally outside of the Democratic Party in order to better target centrist and progressive Evangelicals."[145] As the goal of this PAC was to advocate for money and votes for the Democratic Party, Wallis and Campolo, in trying to woo fellow Evangelicals, worked to establish an "abortion reduction" plank in the Party platform, and thus take back the ability to define the faith and the nation. However,

> Katha Pollitt, writing in *The Nation*, made precisely this observation. "In this sense," she wrote, "Wallis' evangelicalism is as much a power play as Pat Robertson's. And Wallis is as much a power player. By a remarkable act of providence, God's politics turn out to be curiously tailored to the current crisis of the Democratic Party."
>
> Wallis protests that his agenda is not partisan in nature. God, he repeatedly says, "is neither a Republican nor a Democrat," and therefore parties and candidates should "avoid the exploitation of religion or congregations for partisan political purposes." Pollitt, though, is closer to the truth. The net effect of his work as a consultant and advisor to the Democratic Party, his grassroots activism, and his own writing is a partisanship as Democratic as [James] Dobson's is Republican.[146]

Hunter provides more examples of how the policy the Christian Left advocates for is, predictably, in line with the Democratic Party, but again this alone does not lead to a definition of identity politics. Indeed, Christian advocacy on behalf of a broad-based party, rather than for its own rights, could be seen as an example of Christians engaging politics in a non-identity politics way. However, what makes this particular association identity driven, and an example of identity politics, is the packaging of political positions in *ressentiment*-tinged biblical rhetoric. Demonstrating Wallis' willingness to tie everything from foreign policy to the minimum wage to biblical passages, including suggesting the Old Testament prophets would be "screaming on the White House lawn about the justice of God," Hunter notes that the

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[144] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144.

[145] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144.

[146] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144.

> problem, of course, is that Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and the other prophets were living in a Jewish theocratic setting. The only way that Wallis and others can make these strong statements is to confuse America with Israel and the political dynamics of modern American democracy with the divine laws mandated for ancient Israel. It isn't that the wisdom of scripture is irrelevant for the formation of political values, but one can only make the close associations and specific political judgments Wallis does by turning progressive religion into a civil religion of the Left. It may be a more compassionate civil religion than what one finds in the American mainstream, but it is just a different expression of the same phenomenon, not something different from it. Both Right and Left, then, aspire to a righteous empire.[147]

Social change, driven by a commitment to the social justice narrative of Scripture above all other narratives, produces a Christian Left which is very comfortable with, and in agreement with, the economic and other concerns of the Democratic Party. Indeed, "[w]ith the possible exception of abortion, there is little in the actions and writings of the larger Christian Left that would be objectionable to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party."[148]

Further, the Christian Left is often used as a means to an end by the Democratic Party, just as the Christian Right is by the Republican Party. Part of Hunter's key argument is that the will to power is a major driver in all political action, both by political parties and quite often for those who get involved, including of course the church in its various expressions. When one group sees an opportunity to advance its agenda by using the rhetoric of another, the price of harmonizing the organizations is hardly questioned. This happened on the Christian Left especially starting in 2005, as the Democratic Party started intentionally reaching out to moderate and progressive Christians to get their votes.

However, the Democratic Party has not always taken the Christian Left seriously, especially in regards to being able to facilitate social change. But it is in this relationship that Hunter is also able to see the formation of the Christian Left's identity:

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[147] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 147.

[148] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 144.

> Wallis and others *do* take issue with the secular Left for not taking religion seriously, "mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change." Yet, in substance, the perspective they offer is not an alternative to the ideology of the secular left, but a faith-based extension of its discourse; the social movement they want to lead, its popular base.[149]

As we recall, the Christian Left has among its core convictions the Word of God (depending on the group, some holding to a more literal interpretation), and the commitment to the narrative of justice found in the Bible which plays out a view of social justice. In this way, one could argue that the Christian Left identifies itself by its foundational assumption that social justice is the primary narrative that the church should consider in advocating before the state. This is the foundational understanding of the identity of the Christian Left; however, as with the Republican overtures to the Christian Right, "the language of faith is not viewed by Party officials as the foundation for social justice or peace, but rather as a way to relate rhetorically to the electorate and mobilizing them to vote."[150] Control over the power of the State is the goal of the political parties, and they add to the identity of the Christian the seduction of power.

In sum, the identity of the Christian Left stems from their two core convictions: a biblical social justice narrative and a commitment to the project of liberalism. This identity is tempered by defining themselves primarily as a truer expression of the Christian faith than the Christian Right whom they consider to be their primary opponents in the political theater. Further, the Christian Left endorses many of the philosophical underpinnings of liberalism, specifically as it relates to liberty, equality, and fraternity, from which they then take a praxis approach from the cares of this world in order to demonstrate themselves as a more relevant and compassionate expression of the Christian faith. However, the identity politics problem of privileging a group's

[149] Hinter, *To Change the World*, 145.

[150] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 148–49.

priorities over a lack of shared vision also becomes a problem for the Christian Left in two ways. The first is that by intentionally defining themselves in opposition to the Christian Right, and by elevating the social justice imperative of Scripture, they are neglecting significant portions (such as sexual morality and opposition to abortion) of the Christian message which deal with the concerns of fellow Christians. Second, by allowing Scripture to serve as a praxis point for engaging culture, the Christian Left faces the temptation of allowing culture to drive the agenda and set the terms of engagement, thus minimizing the narrative of the Bible. It may also promote a theological pluralism that runs contrary to the Christian message by attempting to distinguish truths which are broadly held, as if the broad holding of a belief indicates the truthfulness of such truth. Since Christian truths are to be formed on the basis of Scripture, and not opinion or popular vote, watering down the truth is neglecting to fulfill the Christian responsibility. In short, and similarly to the identity of the Christian Right, the Christian Left identity carries with it the potential for engagement in identity politics, as the codependency of God's call for justice and America's liberal destiny lend the weight of immediacy and moral obligation to every political situation. Indeed, everything becomes politicized in this identity.

The Christian Left's relationship to the neighbor is an important component of their political engagement. Indeed, the very term "relevance to" demonstrates an imperative being placed upon those who engage in this model intentionally seeking out their community. Further, the liberal priority of fraternity requires relationship with the neighbor. On the surface then, the Christian Left appears to take seriously the needs of the neighbor, and care for the marginalized is certainly a commendable orientation of this group.

There is, however, one critique of engagement in this "relevance to" model which must be noted. By engaging culture with the primary focus being on advocating for justice, there is the

opportunity to make the marginalized neighbor a political pawn or idealize marginalization. The core conviction of commitment to a liberal political agenda raises the question of what the priorities of the Christian Left ultimately are: whether to advocate for the world from a Christian worldview, or whether to assist in implementing a particular political program. By working from a position of "relevance to" and using the praxis approach to Scripture, the Christian Left allows the world to set the agenda into which God must fit, and in their view, God always sides with the marginalized, and therefore with the Democrats who are in solidarity with them or come from their ranks.

When the secular Left advocates for evolutionary principles, redefining marriage, or other things which run contrary to the Bible, a person on the Christian Left finds herself conflicted. With whom should I stand or what should I stand for? For members of the mainline Protestant churches—for whom the Bible is not seen as the infallible Word of God—this problem is less problematic. For those who hold a high view of Scripture, however, this problem remains. As the Christian Left finds itself relating properly to those who lack justice, the arc of justice is defined more by the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity, in whatever expression happens to be viewed as the highest good at the moment. A difficulty in faithful engagement for the Christian Left is seen when, on the one hand, the liberally-oriented political ranks are dominated by those for whom the values of liberalism are the highest good, and, on the other hand, when liberal-leaning Christians eschew the biblical narrative themselves. In this way, a neighbor whose needs are not being met by the state, such as the marginalized immigrant, can be understood as mistreated by the program of liberalism, the Democratic Party, and the Christian Left when the justice of God is replaced with a lesser justice, such as an empty promise of a *quid pro quo* reward in exchange for votes, which stems not from Christian concern for the neighbor, but from

the view of the neighbor as a potential voter.

Finally, we ask, what of the goals of the state among the Christian Left? Continuing to draw out the parallels between the Christian Left and Christian Right, Hunter explains the nature of the relationship between these groups and their respective political parties:

> found in their relationship with the party system and the Democratic Party in particular. With all sincerity, they aspire to broaden and deepen the values people bring to the political process. But influence is never unidirectional in any relationship. Given the resources of the Democratic Party and the special interests that drive it, there is little question that progressive Christianity is instrumentalized (or used as a means to an end) by the Democratic Party in its quest for power, just as conservative Christianity has been used for quite some time by the Republican Party. For many years it was profoundly frustrating for Democrats to be out of power. They finally recognized that they could not regain power without accommodating their discourse to the religious beliefs of their constituency.[151]

Again, as with the question of the relationship to the neighbor, one on the Christian Left needs to ponder who is setting the goals for Christian engagement. Consider the commitment to justice element of the Christian Left core convictions. This commitment is the hallmark of Christian Left engagement, but who defines justice? Often the justice of God is not in line with justice understood in the present culture, and the church's ability to speak the truth of God on justice becomes problematic in a pluralistic society, not to mention in a political party that values diversity of opinion on all variables—religion included—above all else. Advocating for God's justice is certainly a role of the church. Advocating for justice based in a culture steeped in the latter days of liberalism and normal nihilism is not.

In the end, the fact that both the Christian Right and Christian Left engage in identity politics because of their politically defined identity and core convictions is clearly seen in their desire for political power. It is this desire for power that leads to the addition of a nationalist

[151] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 148.

narrative to their core convictions, and it is this desire for power combined with a moralizing narrative of powerlessness that yields close and often uncritically accepted relationships with the two major political parties of the day: "The political goals are different but the *realpolitik* is, in essence, identical to the long-standing instrumentalization of the Christian conservative constituency by the Republican Party—control over the power of the State."[152]

To recap this discussion let us consider the two questions posed for deliberating. First, does the engagement of the "relevance to" paradigm fit the definition of identity politics? There were three ways in which I described engagement in identity politics playing out: first, a *ressentiment*-induced engagement; second, a member-constructed narrative of marginalization; and finally, the seeking of correctives to address the ways they believe themselves to be wronged. For the "relevance to" group the turn to identity politics is as readily available a temptation as it is for the "defensive against" paradigm group, and for much of the same reasons, though they have some that are unique to themselves. First, the *ressentiment* of this group is specifically aimed at the Christian Right, that is, at fellow members of the church catholic, rather than first at a particular philosophical worldview. By extension, the tenets of conservatism are seen as targets for the Christian Left, but only by association with the Christian Right. By seeing themselves in this light, they construct a clear narrative of marginalization, though the marginalization may come as much from the church (Christian Right) as from the world (secular Left). However, a second pillar of their marginalization story works as they find themselves caucusing in the Democratic Party with other groups who are, in the view of Mark Lilla, likely to engage in identity politics. Remembering the seventeen groups and messages on the Democratic Party's website that Lilla points to as an embodiment of an identity politics platform, the appeals to these groups for the

[152] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 149.

values of liberalism may strike a harmonious chord with those seeking to be relevant to the fellow marginalized. Finally, the Christian Left seeks correctives by teaming with the Democratic Party to advance liberal political goals, and ultimately win a battle against the Christian Right and their interpretation of the morals of the church.

To the second question we now turn: how does their engagement behave in regards to the four significant concerns that a turn to identity politics raises, namely the lack of a shared vision, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of the neighbor, and the improper functioning of the state. Lilla's recognition of the lack of shared vision on the secular left is damning of the Christian Left's engagement as well. As to the concern raised by the politicization of everything, their commitment to the ideals of liberalism, namely, justice through the lenses of liberty, equality, and fraternity, requires things to be understood politically, and resolved politically. There is no issue that can be deemed as pure as someone can always argue that they are not getting a fair share, or that justice was not served on their behalf. By striving for an impossible ideal, all issues will continue to be politicized, thus potentially reflecting a state of normal nihilism in which all values being equal, no value truly matters. This problem extends to the marginalized neighbor as well, since such neighbor is unable to receive the justice he deserves in his own particularity because his needs are no greater than or less than the needs of another. Finally, the turn of the state to the full ends of liberalism is problematic because it ultimately leads to a state with no direction, and no true guiding principles. Without offering a binding structure, something that all citizens (and residents) are able to share, the state is incapable of carrying out its duties. The collapsing of the worldview of the "relevance to" model into the platform of the Democratic Party and its commitment to liberalism ultimately leaves the state rudderless.

Purity From

A third group, distinct from the "defensive against" and "relevance to" models, yet sharing in some characteristics of each, appears as the final paradigm from Hunter, the "purity from" group. Similar to the "defensive against" folks, the "purity from" group demonstrates a "desire to preserve the historical truths of Christian faith."[153] However, the "purity from" group is much more pessimistic about what can be done for the fallen state. At the same time, "[t]here are several points of commonality between the Christian Left and the neo-Anabaptists,"[154] who make up the "purity from" paradigm and who, Hunter notes, often vote similarly to the Christian Left. However, again, the neo-Anabaptists are less optimistic about the strength of the state, preferring to keep their distance and maintain their distinctive nature, hence the title "purity from."

The core convictions of the "purity from" camp are as varied as the traditions that find themselves at home within the camp. However, within the groups there is the consistency of the message: Jesus is Lord, and the church and state are to be distinctly separated. The distinct separation is varied in the way each group arrives at that point. The neo-Anabaptists make up the leading edge of this group, and in explaining the function of the "purity from" model Hunter especially engages them. Yet the variety of others who see the church's role in the world in like fashion makes for a diverse set of political viewpoints. Speaking of groups ranging from traditionalist Catholics to Pentecostals, Hunter notes that while

> these Christians would not share much in common with neo-Anabaptists politically or in terms of social class, they tend to operate with a "two kingdoms" view of church and the world that also moves them to increasingly withdraw into their own communities with less and less interest in any engagement with the larger world. It is

[153] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 218.

[154] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 150.

> also in the "purity from" paradigm where one would locate those ecumenical gestures in Christianity toward a "new monasticism."[155]

The distinct separation plays out in a number of ways, which is different from the engagement of either the Christian Right or Left in their understanding of church and state, which anticipates a somewhat synthesized relationship between church and state, a relationship which finds its beginnings in the unification of church and state under the rulership of Constantine.

The commitment to Jesus' lordship serves as a strong core conviction for the "purity from" paradigm, and in reality, it is because of this lordship that the separatist claim of the group exists. The neo-Anabaptist position "keeps its distance from the State, maintaining a basic distrust toward its structure, action, and use of power."[156] The reason for this separation is the "mythic ideal that animates the neo-Anabaptist: the ideal of true and authentic New Testament Christianity and the primitive church of the apostolic age."[157] For the "purity from" group the goal is to live as "an authentic Christian congregation whose life, order, and practices were inspired by the witness of Christ and the gospels and the social ethics of the Christian church in the apostolic age—living in simplicity, sharing goods in common, caring for the poor and widowed, seeking reconciliation, and making peace."[158] By trying to pull the ethics of the New Testament forward to the twenty-first century, the "purity from" practitioners thus believe they are presenting the purest understanding of the lordship of Christ, untainted by the stains of the world, and distinct correctives to the other two models. The "purity from" group desires to be recognized for its radically different existence.

In the Gospels the lordship of Christ and the radical message of his ministry and life are on

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[155] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 218.

[156] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 151.

[157] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 151.

[158] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 151.

full display, and the neo-Anabaptists believe the call of the Christ-follower to be no less radical. However, the Constantinian revolution of the church got in the way of that life and message by unifying the church and state.

> With the conversion of Constantine and then the Edict of Milan in AD 313, came a rapprochement between piety and power that compromised the church's distinctiveness and thus its inimitable witness to the world. The Constantinian error has been fatal in many ways. Rather than challenging the principalities and powers, the people of God became united with the powers; rather than proclaiming peace, the church embraced an ethic of coercion, power and, thus, violence; rather than resisting the power of the state, the church provided divine legitimation for the state, which has invariably led to the hubris of empire, conquest, and persecution; rather than modeling a new kind of society, the church imitated the social structures of hierarchy and administration; rather than being a servant to the poor and the oppressed, the church has been complicit in wielding economic and political power over the poor and oppressed.[159]

The Christian Right receives strong rebuke[160] for this, but the neo-Anabaptists object to the same desire for power evident in the Christian Left. On this account, the "purity from" group breaks with the Christian Left as well. Thus, the core conviction of the lordship of Christ requires a radical, visible difference from either of the other groups.

The radical nature of the lordship of Christ permeates every aspect of our Christian living, thus for the "purity from" camp everything about our existence is grounds for pointing out the disparities between the New Testament description and our present conditions. For instance, global capitalism is a significant foil because it is seen as by nature oppressive; oppressive not just because there is not equitable distribution of economy, but because "when it is working well, capitalism deforms and corrupts human desire, turning it into the insatiable appetite for more and more."[161] Thus capitalism and the resulting lust for worldly treasures distorts our relationship to

[159] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 153.

[160] See Hunter, *To Change the World*, 150.

[161] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 154.

the one whom we are to desire with all of our heart, soul and mind.

So in opposition to the Christian Right and Left, the neo-Anabaptist narrative pushes them away from the temptation to be associated with the state, or to align itself with temporal power, trusting rather in the omnipotent God. For them, the "problem today is that the American church is caught up in a dual allegiance to both Christ and the political economy of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism. Loyalty to this political economy is nothing less than idolatry."[162]

We have seen what the core conviction of the lordship of Christ denies, namely, a perverted relationship with the temporal notions of power and mammon. But how does this lordship of Christ function positively as a formative core conviction? Otherwise stated, we may ask, what does this new life look like, rather than simply what does it oppose?

> Individually and collectively, discipleship entails a sharing in Christ's indiscriminant, sacrificial love but especially on behalf of those in need, subordinating one's own interests on behalf of others, and dying to the false gratifications of the world. As the body of Christ, the church is called to share in a life that culminates in the cross. But the cross is not just a personal problem. For Jesus, the cross was political punishment. When believers are truly imitating Christ, their very existence, not to mention their actions, will be perceived as a threat to the reigning powers. When the church is the church, it will suffer the condescension and hostility of the world for its social and political nonconformity. When that happens, the community of faith should endure it, as Christ did; without defense, without retribution, with active forgiveness.[163]

A variety of commitments fleshes out the understanding of the core convictions centered in the messianic identity and mission of Jesus. First, since Jesus, God-become-man, went to the bottom as an innocent sufferer, Christlike suffering is prescriptive for Christians, and not optional. Within Jesus's ministry there is also the rejection and condemnation of violence and coercion of any kind. That commitment is to be carried out by his church, and in the "purity from" model is accomplished through pacifism. Finally, Jesus not only rejected the temptation to

[162] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 155.

[163] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 158.

political power, but he actively challenged and even overcame the political powers of the day, thus providing a model for his church which, innately flawed as she is, is tempted to acquire temporal power and thus be led away from a true relationship with God. For the neo-Anabaptists this understanding of violence associated with power extends so far as to encourage and morally implore people to leave vocations such as running businesses, or serving in the military.[164]

Using our fourfold lens for analysis in regards to identity politics, we now turn to considering the identity of the "purity from" group in terms of their core convictions. The identity is easy to state: subjects of the Lord Jesus who are sharply separated from the state. In seeing herself as a church that existed in an ideal form before Constantine and which will endure after its Constantinian capitulation, the church is cast as a timeless and particularly "*postsecular*" reality, prepared to exist beyond the end of modernity and the project of philosophical liberalism. Thus "in lived-history the people of God are to be 'resident aliens,' a 'Christian colony,' an 'alien' people,' defined by its own purposes and the practices of baptism, servanthood, forgiveness, and the love of enemies."[165]

This framing leads to another important aspect of identity: the church is to be a worshiping community: "It is in the preaching of the Word, in the observance of sacrament, and in the practice of praise that the church achieves its highest purpose."[166] By forming disciples to obey Jesus, the church creates the true community or *polis*: "Citizenship in the church is true citizenship, one that trumps loyalties in the world. It creates an alternative space in the world and an alternative set of practices against which the world is judged and beckoned."[167] While these

[164] For the basis of these observations, see Hunter, *To Change the World*, 156–59.

[165] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 161.

[166] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 161.

[167] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 161.

words and concepts can be teased out of the Bible, Hunter offers a word of caution that is good to hear:

> Where the identity of the Christian Right is forged largely through their opposition to secularism and secularists, where the identity of the Christian Left derives from their opposition to the Right, the collective identity of the neo-Anabaptists comes through their dissent from the State and the larger political economy and culture of late modernity. Their identity *depends* on the State and other powers being corrupt and the more unambiguously corrupt they are, the clearer the identity and mission of the church. It is, as my colleague Charles Mathewes has put it, a passive-aggressive ecclesiology. The church depends on its status as a minority community in opposition to a dominant structure in order to be effective in its criticism of the injustices of democratic capitalism.[168]

The neo-Anabaptists may certainly be described as a marginalized community, and they are both used to it and expect it. However, since they have sworn off power and the effort of achieving it by political or economic means, they tend not to be overly concerned about being powerless. The desire for power is not a driving desire of their engagement with the state. Thus, although their identity of marginalization could lead to an identity-politics-based engagement with the state—namely, a ressentiment-induced engagement with politics whereby the primary motive for interaction is the correcting of perceived wrongs for a particular group united by the particular identity which believes itself to be marginalized—it does not precisely apply here.

On the other hand, the idea of being the true *polis*, having the true power of God on their side, and the moral superiority that comes with a sharp distinction between the group and the rest does create some of the same trappings that we see in identity politics. The desire for purity in the church, an absolutely legitimate concern, leads to a separatist impulse. Hunter notes that there is a dispute over exactly how separatist the neo-Anabaptists should be,[169] but there is certainly agreement that the church and state should be distinct. To this end they are quite right.

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[168] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

[169] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 162

However, there is a legitimate question that needs to be raised: are they so relentlessly negative about the state that they fail to see it as belonging to God? If indeed the separatism goes too far, it is quite possible that their approach could lead to a failure to take seriously the state and her concerns, or the marginalized neighbor and his concerns before the state. The focus on the coming of the Kingdom of Christ, blinds them from seeing the value of God's penultimate works, such as those done in the state. Their inability to discern God's work in the temporal realm can ignore an important part of God's reigning for all creatures through the state.

A related critique of this group is that by politicizing everything they have attempted to remove themselves from the conversation. For the neo-Anabaptists, associating everything with the will to power and believing the whole system to be irredeemably corrupt and contemptible ultimately renders a relationship that does not care about serious engagement with the world that God created and the structure that God put in place to serve neighbors. By making use of an "us-versus-them" stance, the "purity from" group is able to cast off creaturely responsibility. By seeking to protect themselves, and God, from the imperfection of this world, they further subject the world to the ugly side of politics, identity and otherwise. Rather than offering a view where engagement allows political concerns to be properly discerned, their disengagement promotes the politicization of everything, and the surrender of this world to whomever wields the power at the moment. Their engagement is "a political theology that reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so ubiquitous in our late modern political culture."[170]

Understanding the "purity from" group's relationship to the neighbors is a matter of perspective. To outsiders it appears that many practitioners of this model, specifically the neo-Anabaptists, operate with "a strategy of withdrawal, tribalism, and, therefore, political

[170] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 166.

irrelevance."[171] From this perspective there appear to be two classes of citizens for this group, which fits with the "us-against-them" aspect of their identity. On the one hand, the Christians would appear to treat each other in a loving way. Displaying the generosity of shared possessions, the refusal to use power, the rejection of hierarchical relationships and the like produces a church wherein each member is fully responsible to the others: a modern-day community living out the book of Acts understood in a prescriptive way.

On the other hand, the Christians appear to be aloof at best, or antagonistic at worst, to the world and its struggles. The "passive-aggressive ecclesiology" highlighted in the section on their identity "may partly explain why it is that the tone and character of their critique of the world and the church is, in its parts and in its sum, so relentlessly negative."[172] By viewing others—whether the Christian Right or the secular world—as drivers of great injustices leveled against the true church, it seems that the "purity from" group is happy to exacerbate the differences in a way which allows them to feel more justified, and perhaps holier, because of the perceived discrimination against the true church. This group's relative disinterest in political activity can be negatively viewed as an apathy that precludes helping neighbors in need. Hunter admits that "one does find affirmations of the poor and victims of oppression and affirmations of an eschatological church, but little else beyond"[173] in their critiques, because of the lack of good in the world. He explains: "In the writings of the neo-Anabaptist theologians, there is little good in the world that deserves praise and no beauty that generates wonder and appreciation."[174] The purist's countercultural impulse can lead to a monocultural or, worst anticultural, stance and

[171] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 166.

[172] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

[173] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

[174] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

group identity, which then negatively impacts the ability to relate to the neighbor other in a constructive way.

Finally, an outsider considering the relationship of the "purity from" group to the rest of the church on earth realizes immediately the broken nature of the relationship.

> As to the church, there is much to admire about it as a theological abstraction or, say, as it could be or yet will be. But of the church as it exists in the here and now of history, there is little to admire except in the work of a few exemplary Christians such as Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, and their followers. The majority of American Christians and the churches they attend, by contrast, are mostly corrupted by neo-Constantinianism and/or and unthinking rapprochement with global capitalism. The failure of the church is everywhere visible.[175]

This leads to the assertion, by Stanley Hauerwas, that the corrupted Christian church on earth is getting its deserved death by the hands of God.[176]

Of course, this is the outsider's view, and those in the "purity from" paradigm would state things a little differently. For them, the distinction between the true church and the world is necessary, and only theologically challenging to those who are too steeped in the culture to see the radical purity promised by obeying the call of Christ. The accusation that their strategy was of withdrawal leading to political irrelevance "was rejected unequivocally by [John Howard] Yoder when he was alive and is mostly rejected today."[177] Indeed they would argue that their engagement

> only withdraws from responsibility as the world understands it. By existing as an alternative humanity living a different way of life, it constitutes a fundamental challenge to the ways of the world. This kind of lived-proclamation, they argue, does not constitute a withdrawal but rather is its primary and most effective form of political responsibility."[178]

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[175] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 164.

[176] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 165.

[177] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 166.

[178] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 166.

So in keeping with their identity, the "purity from" paradigm would advocate not to the state on behalf of the neighbor, but rather to the neighbor on behalf of God. The neighbor finally only gets his needs truly met by turning away from the state and toward this expression of the church. By multiplying and magnifying the difference between the church, rightly understood, and the state, which is aligned with the wrong understanding of the church, and by marginalizing themselves from the seats of power, this group is presenting the proper priorities of God, and thus being perfectly political in their own, negative, way.

Drawing on the assumption that political suffering is the only form of suffering that matters for a Christian, the "purity from" camp has goals for the state that are predictably completely different from the goals of the Christian Right or Left. Rather than hoping to have certain policies enacted, or certain wrongs righted, they seek to judge the power structures, and thus allow for the pure reign of God to break in. Thus,

> neo-Anabaptists fundamentally redefine the nature of politics and political action. Insofar as the church refuses to operate according to the rules of reigning powers but according to the requirements of biblical obedience, the politics of Christian faith is rightly seen as a "negative intervention" against the dominant powers and their processes of social change. This intervention is negative in the sense that its very existence is a judgment against power structures that are, after the Fall, corrupt by their very nature. The challenge Jesus made to the legitimacy of the ruling authorities of his day were so politically relevant that they put him to death for it.[179]

So for the "purity from" group, "the only justifiable strategy is to separate from darkness as a community of light."[180] So rather than being concerned about any policy being enacted, they place the primary focus on the church being good and the state being evil. The goals for the state, as with the churches which wrongly align with it, may be described as dying a deserved death. In other words, for this group, the state is a temporary necessary evil, and human existence would

[179] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 163.

[180] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 220.

be better without it. This is not just an eschatological desire either. This is the view which gives rise to the concept of forming "Christian communities."[181]

Now it is time to answer the two questions that guided our analysis of the other models of the church-state relationship. First, "does the engagement of the "purity from" paradigm fit the definition of identity politics—i.e., is there *ressentiment*-induced engagement, do members construct a narrative of marginalization, and are they seeking correctives for the ways in which they believe themselves to be wronged? The answer to this question is a qualified yes. On the one hand, the members do quite intentionally construct a narrative of marginalization. For them, there is no reason to want to be seen as part of the state because "in its fallen state, the world is irredeemable this side of Christ's return."[182] For this reason, they strive for a purity not seen in the American church, which has "been compromised by its complicity with the world's sinfulness."[183] So the marginalization aspect is defining for the group.

The rest of the definition of identity politics, specifically relating to seeking correctives and *ressentiment*-induced engagement, are less prevalent in this group in terms of engagement with the state because their engagement is not based on a goal of getting what they desire from the temporal realm—indeed that would run exactly contrary to the message that they preach. Instead, they are rightly focused on the hope that Christians have, anticipating the return of Christ when redemption will happen and there will be no need for the state as it presently exists, as all things will be fused together in the reign of God. This focus on being the church provides them with a clear purpose for their existence. This purpose, however, runs into problems when engagement

[181] See, for instance, Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

[182] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 218.

[183] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 218.

on behalf of a neighbor necessitates invoking the power of the state. Because of their commitment to pacifism, these problems are dramatically compounded if the needs of a neighbor prompt the state to use the violence of the sword as in a just war. For the purity from group, there are few correctives to be sought through the inherently violent state; the ultimate corrective will come from God in the last days. In its own way, this position produces a form of *ressentiment*: members of this group are powerless in terms of temporal power, yet revenge will be meted out as vindication of those who are moral, in the eschaton. Thus although the "purity from" group cannot be cleanly defined as engaging in traditional identity politics because of their reluctance to desire the power of the state, there are still aspects of the definition which are fitting such as their narrative of marginalization and desire for ultimate vindication.

The second question is: how does the purity group's engagement behave in regards to the four significant concerns that a turn to identity politics raises? To recap, these concerns are the lack of shared vision, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of the marginalized neighbor and the improper functioning of the state. In terms of the shared vision, there can be none as there are basically two camps: those who have seen the true light and attempt to form the church on earth through its distinctive difference, and those who have not and continue to live in the darkness of chasing the political power of the day. Admitting that the world does not agree with a Christian worldview is quite accurate. However, when the distinction between church and world is pressed in the "purity from" paradigm, the totality of the story of God's work in all of creation, including the temporal realm including government itself, is disregarded, or worse despised. When this happens, very real neighbors may be harmed, and the good gifts God has to give through the state may go unreceived.

In terms of the politicization of everything, again this group does so in a distinctly different

way. Rather than turning to politics so as to solve any problems or issues, they view the politics and inherent violence of the state as the fundamental issue to be overcome by the church. Thus, the church becomes its own community, with a peculiar politics defined as part of its ontology. Their focus is solely on following Christ consistently in the world, which acknowledges his lordship in creation. Yet without recognizing God's work in and through the temporal realm, they ignore and even reject a vital responsibility to care for their fellow humans. While it is likely that folks in the "purity from" paradigm will engage in acts of charity, real hope for the marginalized neighbor to have his needs met is not believed to be accessible through the government or at least through certain vocations in the state—certainly none that use the sword. Finally, this group's disdain for the state means that they have no interest in seeing it function except as a foil for the purity of their position. As the state is wholly unable to accomplish the goals of God, it is disparaged and disregarded.

Faithful Presence

After defining and describing these three models, Hunter proposes a different model for understanding cultural engagement which he titles "faithful presence." We now examine this model to see whether his offered form of engagement continues the connection to identity politics, or if it is able more fully to avoid the trappings.

The background to the title of "faithful presence" is as important as the background to the titles chosen for the "defensive against," "relevance to," and "purity from" models. Appealing to what he recognizes as a loss of trust in words, and in turn a lack of connection to the real world, Hunter builds his suggestion on two essential lessons.

> The first is that *incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and world and the problems that attend it*. From this follows the second: *it is the way the Word became incarnate in*

> *Jesus Christ and the purposes to which the incarnation was directed that are the only adequate reply to [the] challenge of difference.*[184]

Therefore, for

> the Christian, if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God's word of love becomes flesh in us, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks; to the words we speak and the realities to which we, the church, point.[185]

By relating to the world in this way, we are emulating the way that God relates to his world. He adds: "At root, a theology of faithful presence begins with an acknowledgement of God's faithful presence to us and that his call upon us is that we be faithfully present to him in return."[186]

The totality of the Kingdom of God understood through this interpretation of the formative nature of the Bible, and God's fully present existence to the church, are the primary core convictions through which Hunter builds his reading of Scripture and posture of engagement. These convictions highlight the faithfulness of God, given to us by his presence among us, in the person of Jesus Christ, and now in his breaking into our world through the Eucharist.[187] Implicit in this conviction are the points that people are the "other" whom God must (and faithfully does) pursue, and that God does not coerce people to follow him against their own will. So when the time comes for engaging the world, commitment and promise, demonstrated first by God to us, are imperatives. Continuing his thought through God's faithfulness reveals a final core conviction: the presence of God's people to him as a worshiping community. By worshiping together, even in devotional solitude, Christians are able to align themselves with God's will and kingdom. He writes: "Only by being fully present to God as a worshiping community and as

[184] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 241.

[185] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 241.

[186] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243.

[187] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243.

adoring followers can we be faithfully present in the world."[188] The community of faithfully worshiping creatures redeemed by the ultimately most faithfully present God is the identity that a practitioner would have.

The relationship to the neighbor is seen when "faithful presence" is played out by the Christian in the first of three arenas Hunter describes: "faithful presence to each other." When considering faithful living among each other, the Christian discovers two basic groups: the community of believers, and those outside the community. Hunter rightly argues that there is no distinction in the way that either group should be viewed in terms of being faithfully present. Christians act the same way toward both those within and without the church: "we pursue each other, identify with each other, and direct our lives toward the flourishing of each other through sacrificial love."[189]

Faithful presence entails bearing the truths of God to all neighbors all the time. We are called to active love on behalf of the other, a love rooted in the Old Testament understanding of care for the sojourner, of which the Bible reminds us "we too were aliens once—ones outside the community—yet this is how God treated us."[190] Thus through our actions and efforts we embody sacrificial love to all neighbors: "Believer or nonbeliever, attractive or unattractive, admirable or disreputable, upstanding or vile—the stranger is marked by the image of God."[191] In opposition to the three paradigms Hunter laid out, strife and enmity, *ressentiment*-induced engagement, and the challenges associated with them are nowhere to be found. Indeed, just as those in the body of Christ, the stranger is not a threat or irredeemable darkness, but rather a fellow creature of God

[188] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244.

[189] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244.

[190] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 245.

[191] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 245.

in need of his redemption.

The other two arenas that help to frame Hunter's understanding of the Christian's relationship to his neighbor, and the ends that he seeks to affect others with his work, are faithful presence "to our tasks" and "within our spheres of influence." These two arenas tell us something about how we go about loving our neighbor. Faithful presence to our tasks is work done "as working for the Lord." For Hunter this provides an orientation that maintains the "faithful" element of faithful presence, and maintains what he calls a "built-in safeguard against our work—whatever it is—becoming a source of idolatry."[192] Further, "we see our labors as a means by which we honor God and pursue obedience to him."[193]

While this "faithful presence" model is certainly honoring to God, it is also clear that often times the neighbor becomes just an object in the process of my doing good works: do I truly love my neighbor, or am I only focused on my relationship with God? Similarly, there is no guide for how a Christian is to contemplate a variety of possible good works. It seems that Hunter argues for an all-or-nothing approach to works, either the work pleases God or it does not. How should a Christian discern when presented with two God-pleasing options, but opportunity to only do one-or-the-other? Or, how can a Christian remain faithful when neither option is fully God-pleasing?

Hunter also argues for "faithful presence within our spheres of influence," which incorporates a number of locations: "their families, neighborhoods, voluntary activities, and places of work."[194] This presumably includes the state, though there is no specific mention of such a location or space. The burning question for "faithful presence" in this category is about

[192] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

[193] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

[194] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

the use of power. For Hunter, the use of power

> must conform to the way of Jesus: rooted in intimacy with the Father, rejecting the privileges of status, oriented by a self-giving compassion for the needs of others, and not only noncoercive toward those outside the community of faith, but committed indiscriminately to the good of all.[195]

So the Christian seeks to build Jesus-approved structures for organizing our lives, including seeking "new patterns of social organization that challenge, undermine, and otherwise diminish oppression, injustice, enmity, and corruption and, in turn, encourage harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, security, and well-being."[196] By functioning in this way, Hunter believes, the rule of God will come to exist in every place and sphere of earth where Christians are present.

Hunter's emphasis on "faithful presence within our spheres of influence" is commendable in that it accounts for local participation in making a difference for neighbors in every sphere of life. Moreover, his critique of the church's use of temporal power as a way to effect such change safeguards against the church's confusion of her mission with the state's temporal means to effect change in the world. Having said that, Hunter does not clearly articulate the theological significance of the state in an account of God's temporal realm, and thus does not reflect on goals for the state in God's rule. In this regard, it seems that Hunter's model of "faithful presence" does not yet take the state seriously enough for the average Christian. While "the call of faithful presence gives priority to what is right in front of us—the community, the neighborhood, and the city, and the people of which these are constituted,"[197] engagement with the state is often larger than one's local sphere. It could be, however, that rather than advocating

[195] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247.

[196] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 247–48.

[197] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253.

for engaging the local neighborhood at the expense of the wider world, Hunter is envisioning some form of subsidiarity in his approach to political engagement, which for him would begin with the individual and her local church.

Hunter's vision for "faithful presence" is an attractive way to consider Christian engagement. There is much to be commended in his work, specifically his commitment to faithful living, his orientation toward accomplishing the works that God desires, and the fact that he takes Christian doctrine and life quite seriously. We have also seen that there are a number of questions left unanswered in the model, though in fairness he does rightly acknowledge that the church must live in tension with the world until Christ returns. One can do much worse than his final goal: God himself. Indeed, Hunter would argue that the other paradigms he sketched out make God into a tool to achieve "a certain understanding of the good in society."[198]

In terms of identity politics then, it appears that Hunter's "faithful presence" model avoids the temptation of identity politics. Rather than *ressentiment*-induced engagement, Hunter argues for a positive attitude shaped by Christian love. Instead of constructing a narrative of marginalization, Hunter's approach constructs a narrative of now-and-not-yet victory, in which God is "faithfully present" to Christians who are, in turn, "faithfully present" in their living. Instead of seeking correctives for the ways they believe they have been wronged, "faithful presence" bears the burden of evil as did Christ. This mark is similar to the one that was seen in the "purity from" paradigm, with the difference being that the "purity from" model expects and desires the burden, and the "faithful presence" model tolerates it.

Examining the four significant concerns that identity politics raises, one sees that following the "faithful presence" model is mostly able to avoid the trap of identity politics. For instance,

[198] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 285.

rather than being concerned about finding a shared political vision, Hunter rightly focuses on faithfulness to God over against any particular political goals. This is quite commendable because, as we have discussed, articulating a shared political vision is not the church's mission but rather faithfully following Christ and embodying his love for the world. However, the faithful presence model can be supplemented with a fuller story of God's purposes for the state in the temporal realm. Since this world does belong to the creator, he certainly has much to say about its right functioning. Hunter's model calls for right living among Christians, but a potential retreat into pietistic practices, including quietism, looms in his approach.[199] Hunter notes that the church should be silent for a while, yet the question of when to speak is not clearly addressed. This pietism can lead to a disconnection from the world akin to that seen within the "purity from" model, where the positive aspects of the state—specifically as it serves God's temporal purposes—are neglected or ignored, thus contributing to an improper functioning of the state. Hunter rejects this claim,[200] yet his insistence is not entirely convincing. In another place, he argues that politics "cannot realize the various mythic ideals that inspire different Christian communities, it cannot even reduce the tension that exists between the concrete realities of everyday life and the moral and spiritual ideals of the Kingdom of God."[201] While he is right that the politics of the state is incapable of fully accounting for the Christian story and the difference between Christian goals and worldly ones, it is also worth highlighting that his response to this state of affairs suggests the state's political dealings might not be fully under God's dominion:

[199] See, for example, Donald E. Miller, review of *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* by James Davison Hunter. *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (October 1, 2011): 378.

[200] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 286.

[201] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 186.

"At best, politics can make life in this world a little more just and thus a little more bearable."[202] While Hunter's assessment displays a sober and realistic view of what can be expected of the state in a sinful and imperfect world, it can also lead to a "hands off" attitude toward the right functioning of the state in God's temporal realm. To be sure, Hunter is not wrong in his assessment, and generally speaking Lutherans should agree with his view on this. However, Christian engagement must provide an account for all things, politics included. Hunter's position on this point could be misunderstood, and can certainly be supplemented by interacting more fully with a Lutheran account of God's rule in his two realms through vocations.

In regards to the politicization of everything, the "faithful presence" model also offers some hope. Calling Christians to focus on the things of God and faithfully enacting them within their spheres of influence means that the Christian will not be contributing to the politicization of everything, indeed just the opposite. Hunter's call for Christians to rethink and learn is telling: "*it may be that the healthiest course of action for Christians, on this count, is to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization*."[203] Rather than dealing with things in a political way, the Christian simply lives in action, and does not allow political or other influences outside of Scripture and the church to be the primary informants of his action. But when will this time of silence be over? And what of the interim when political expression is needed by those neighbors presently in need? This "faithful presence" disposition is appealing, but on the other hand focusing too much on simply being faithfully present, the Christian may succumb to quietism, and see or say nothing politically when in fact it might be

[202] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 186.

[203] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 281 (italics original).

salutary and necessary to do so. So again, we see God's work in and through the state is potentially lowered in this model in that the state is not seen, along with the church, as a realm through which God accomplishes his purposes for creation.

By being willing to suffer mistreatment, and by focusing on being fully present in a way that is faithful to God, a Christian engaged in this model would truly help his neighbor in need, regardless of whether the neighbor is a fellow Christian or not. This is commendable. However, potential harm to the marginalized neighbor could come by extension (a neighbor over there who is outside of my sphere of influence, and disconnected from my tasks), or if the Christian were to view actions to help the neighbor as an obligatory good work, rather than an opportunity to serve. Again, the challenge with the "faithful presence" paradigm is that it can tend to focus exclusively on identity in terms of the relationship *coram deo* (that is before God), with the result that that it misses the breadth and dynamics of some important relationships *coram mundo* (that is before the world). Although good may be done to the neighbor, either of two negatives could accompany it. On the one hand, the neighbor could receive the good work not because he is in need, but in order to make the Christian feel justified before God. On the other hand, the immediate needs of the neighbor may be missed or ignored for what this model sees as the greater good of calling the Christian into a right relationship with God.

In each of these cases we have seen a common theme: the state is not taken seriously enough. While Hunter rightly considers vocation and neighbor, his eschatologically-minded core conviction of the fully present existence of God in the church can lead individual Christians into a sort of political fatalism concerning the state of the world, which may in turn lead to a pessimistic or indifferent view of political engagement in the state, particularly for those who do not pursue policy or practice law. Similarly, his focus on the power of elite institutions to change

the culture seems to assume that Christians will or should fill those seats of power to effect positive change. This leaves the common Christian disconnected from the state, wondering if he has any meaningful role to play in it, thus strengthening the allure of identity politics to have his voice heard.

In conclusion to our substantial engagement with Hunter's important work, I wish to offer two summarizing thoughts. First, regardless of the political dispositions, Christians in America are not immune to engagement in identity politics because, as I argued already in chapter two, they are unclear about their identity. Second, there are some threads that provide the hope that there can be Christian engagement that is rightly able to form identity, properly place political priorities, tend to the needs of the neighbor (including the neighbor other, who feels marginalized), and do so while maintaining and advocating for the right functioning of the state. Among those necessary threads: a right understanding of vocation, a right understanding of what the state is, and correctly motivated political thinking and acting.

Fundamentalists, Liberals, and Something Else: D.G. Hart

In the first two models of engagement that Hunter offered, namely "defensive against" and "relevance to," we noticed many similarities even as the two groups sought different political goals. The reason for this, argues D. G. Hart, is that the two groups (which he identifies as fundamentalist and liberal) are functionally the same in their Americanized expression of what it means to be the church. His contention in *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* "is that the Protestant-inspired notion that faith produces compassion, virtue, and harmony—that is, that religion is a benign influence that affects everyday life positively—is what is wrong with

American Protestantism."[204] However, Hunter's critique of the "relevance to" and "defensive against" models demonstrated plainly that this Americanized Protestantism is not the only option for Christians. The "purity from" and "faithful presence" models move beyond these options, noting the viability of other forms of engagement. But we also noted that the "faithful presence" model can be supplemented with a stronger account of God's positive purposes for the state in the temporal realm.

We have thus started to raise the question of the potential Lutheran theological contribution to political engagement. Hart's work serves as a sort of entrée to the next chapter, which explores the Lutheran contribution in more detail, because he sees a significant contrast between American Protestantism and a group he calls "confessionalists" in the way they see themselves in relation to the world. Hart sees the latter group as the third option in the American religious landscape. Rather than removing the church from culture (the position of the "purity from" model), or viewing the church as the only realm of God's reigning (a position that aligns closely with the "faithful presence" model), Hart, it seems to me, suggest another option for engagement in the polis which he assigns to the confessionalist churches. Since he includes the LCMS among confessionalist church bodies, his comments deserve further attention.

I have two goals for this section. First, I will engage Hart's work briefly to demonstrate how both liberals and fundamentalists (Hart's descriptors) function in basically the same way, and how that way leads to the trap of identity politics. The work here will not be groundbreaking, but will suggest that Hart's liberals and fundamentalists, align with Hunter's "relevance to" and "defensive against" models, and thus are cut from the same American religious cloth. Second, I will introduce Hart's third group, namely, the confessionalists. While Hart's understanding of

[204] Hart, *Lost Soul*, xvii.

LCMS churches within this group is not entirely accurate, I note that in some ways his descriptions of the confessional option are brimming with potential for articulating a faithful Christian engagement with the state that does not depend on identity politics and indeed works against it. This engagement with Hart sets up my next chapter wherein I will examine the core convictions, identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state of Lutherans in general, and the LCMS in particular. In the next chapter, then, I will advocate for a Lutheran form of engagement that does not succumb to the traps of identity politics, does not depend on opposing or devaluing God's purpose for the state, and rightly views the entirety of creation as belonging to God. In this proposal, political engagement is grounded in the Lutheran teaching of God's ruling in his two realms for the benefit of his creatures. But, first we need to attend to Hart.

Hart raises the issue of Protestant capitulation to what he calls a conversionist and activist understanding of the individual Christian's role in the world.[205] What he addresses without stating is a challenge raised by identity politics: people pressured politically to prove their conversion by activism, on both sides of the aisle. This shift all began, argues Hart, by 1900. From the time of the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s through the start of the twentieth century, "American Protestants had been eagerly downplaying the mysterious and ceremonial aspects of Christian devotion in order to make the gospel relevant to individuals, families, and society."[206] The end result is that "by 1900 mainstream Protestantism had rid itself of most of Christianity's theoretical obstacles to become the practical solution to the everyday

[205] Tellingly for H. Richard Niebuhr, who advocated finally for the Christ the Transformer of Culture model, conversionism and activism are synonymous. For Hart, conversionism and activism are related, but they are distinct realities so that activism's focus on changing the world serves as a way of authenticating the Christian's true conversion.

[206] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 3.

problems of average Americans."[207]

The revivalism that shaped mainstream American Protestantism had a twofold impact: first it produced holy persons by means of conversion, and second, it "encouraged a variety of reforms that promised a holy society."[208] This promise of a holy society is uniquely American, and has imbedded itself into the fabric of the core convictions of American Protestantism. Indeed, central to the core convictions is recognizing a significant change within the converted soul:

> evangelical Protestantism was a much larger phenomenon that affected a person's whole way of life, both secular and religious, public and private. In fact, the logic of evangelical Protestantism was such that conversion, being as total and radical as the Spirit who caused it, would produce an obviously unique form of religious devotion that could not be sequestered in the observance of certain devotional ceremonies or practices. As a variety of pietism, revivalism stressed the relevance of the faith for all areas of human endeavor.[209]

Having lost its sense of corporal identity in belief and practice, the Protestant church in the U.S. was instead shaped by the religious fervor caused by the revivalist preachers. Out were the creeds and traditions of the church, in was the experience and demonstrations of faith. Thus, "revivalism secured the victory of pietism, which in turn directed mainstream American Protestantism, whether of a Social Gospel variety or an evangelistic stripe, away from the formal and corporate beliefs and practices of the church toward the informal settings and personal affairs of believers."[210] Historical Christianity was changed into a uniquely American Christianity.

The split between the liberals and the fundamentalists, according to Hart, began receiving

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[207] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 3.

[208] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 7.

[209] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 8.

[210] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 23.

attention in the 1920s, and by the 1940s a new vision of fundamentalism emerged which was able to unite Protestants in what would become the Christian Right. Hart noes that this group was marked by "a minimalist creed, a well-oiled machine, some funding, and lots of zeal."[211] Further, it measured its impact by the impact made on people and society, and finally, while it "helped rejuvenate the image of conservative Protestantism, it further obscured the creedal, churchly, and liturgical aspects of historical Protestantism."[212] In other words, both sides were committed to the pietist vision of making faith relevant to life, and "[m]oreover, these varieties of pietism were distinct from confessionalism's overarching assumption about the permanence of the eternal realities communicated through the ministry of the church compared to the passing affairs of life in this world."[213]

The following decades, specifically the 1960s, continued to fuel the rise of the Christian Right which has regularly engaged in identity politics through groups such as the Moral Majority.

> Most scholars date the origins of the religious right in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The chief catalysts for evangelical politics were a series of developments that threatened the family, such as the sexual revolution, feminism, and abortion. Closely related were national debates that changed the character of public schools, at least in the religious right's mind, such as bussing to achieve racial integration and banning prayer and Bible reading. Finally, disputes over the United States' involvement in Vietnam nurtured a sour estimate of the country that did not sit well with many Protestants who regarded America as at the very least a generically Protestant nation that had been mightily blessed by divine favor.[214]

Hart recognizes in the process that Americans were viewing themselves as less religious, and thereby the entire worldview of America as God's chosen nation, or at least blessed by his favor,

[211] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 74.

[212] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 74.

[213] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 74.

[214] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 76.

was changing. The church in America was ill equipped for this upheaval. As the battle lines were drawn in the ensuing culture wars, Hart provides a useful primer of the situation.

> The two-party analysis of American Protestantism, which pits the gospel of individuals against the Social Gospel, has caused many to miss the history and legacy of revivalist Protestantism that both evangelicals and mainliners share. Throughout the twentieth century, evangelicals and liberals have differed over the way to prioritize evangelism, but they have agreed that faith will make an obvious and uplifting difference in individual and social life. This is because fundamentalists, evangelicals, and liberals all trace their roots to revivalist Protestantism's understanding of Christianity as inherently activist and reform minded; it creates virtuous individuals who pursue an equally virtuous society. In sum, evangelical and mainline Protestants both believe that Christianity inevitably produces a Social Gospel that will produce a Christian social order.[215]

Identity politics came to exist when our communities ceased to have thick bonds holding them together, including the bonds of faith. When American liberalism began advocating for a variety of political advancements which are incompatible with a Christian worldview, such as the sexual revolution and abortion, the church failed to have a unified voice. The same can be said when considering the inability of the church to speak in a unified voice for civil rights in terms of desegregation. Rather than Christian unity speaking from Christian convictions, the faith was fragmented into liberal and conservative concerns, and these concerns were fraught with political overtones. The false belief that Christianity ultimately produces a Christian social order had been destroyed, and the church saw her end goal as maintaining or advancing Christian principles in a society that was continually less Christian in name and practice.

As noted above, the fundamentalist and liberal groups function in much the same way even if their outlooks are ultimately opposed. For this reason, I will harmonize their core convictions, identity, relationship to neighbors, and goals for the state, while noting the nuances that make each group unique. The core convictions of both groups include two aspects: the conversionist

[215] Hart, *Lost Soul,*79.

and activist understanding of the faith, and the belief in the American promise of a holy society. This has happened on both sides of the political aisle, and is especially seen in Evangelical political engagement, as noted above in Hart's engagement with Richard V. Pierard.[216]

Hart's use of Pierard's critique shows how Evangelical Protestants are not immune from confusing core convictions of the church's place in the world with an unhealthy and divisive nationalism, which in turn drives political engagement in the interest of establishing a Christian state. As Hart notes, "evangelicals never had any trouble insisting that faith should and, indeed, would make a difference in everything from the domestic relations of families to the international politics of nations."[217] In an age of identity politics, the confusion of church and state in nation-building among fundamentalists has become politicized. For liberals, on the other hand, much of the core convictions of the church have been stripped away, and liberal political goals in the name of social justice have themselves become the core convictions of their activism. This was especially discernable as the urbanization of the nation placed its influence on the church: "But the forces of industrialization, the discoveries of modern science, and the demands of international politics undermined the old absolutes of church and theology. Urban Christians assimilated the outlook of modern society"[218] The result, as Hart concludes, is that "the conflict between liberals and conservatives was one of two competing Christian cultures, one southern and rural, the other northern and urban."[219]

The identity of the two groups can be seen in the concluding sentence above: southern, rural conservatives versus northern, urban liberals. For the two cultures different social agendas

[216] See footnote 34 in this chapter.

[217] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 75.

[218] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 65.

[219] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 65.

emerged: one focused more on the individual (conservatives) and the other on the Social Gospel (liberals), with the tying bind being an identity shaped more by America and the American expressions of Christianity than historical markers of the Christian church. A premium was put on action demonstrating an authentic conversion, and commitment to the creeds and doctrines of the church was minimized. The resulting American Christian would be known more by his political activities than his Christian love per se, because he would frame his beliefs in a way that either conceived or capitulated to the politicization of everything. Not having core convictions that provided necessary political boundaries, the Christian operating in this paradigm, on either the left or the right, found his identity primarily in being an American rather than a Christian.

The relationship to the neighbor in this form of engagement is contingent upon a number of variables, but perhaps the most important variable is the political relationship. I noted above that Hart uses the metaphor, originally coined in the American context by James Davison Hunter,[220] of culture wars in which competing visions for the culture are argued for in a non-civil way. In many cases the engagement of the church, or those who argue for a "Christian" worldview, are unable to avoid resorting to the battles at hand. Thus, engagement from either a liberal or conservative Protestant worldview ultimately puts the Christian at odds with Christians with whom she disagrees, and in "fellowship" with non-Christians with whom she shares political affinity. This situation, combined with a politized vision of church life and doctrine, perpetuates the notion that the church is one of many things which may make up a person's political identity, thus leaving "Christian" identity muddied and inauthentic in its expression to the world. In the process, marginalized neighbors become political objects, and church and state are worse off

[220] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

given their conflation.

Finally, the goals of the two groups are, as argued by Hart, to bring about a Christian America of one stripe or another. In order to accomplish their preferred ends—whether it be inaugurating the second coming of Christ or accomplishing the ends of social justice—the church becomes cozy with the state, thus tying itself to political goals and power. The tying of itself to political goals and power thus makes the goals of the state political goals. Ideology and the will to power become the highest goals, and in the process ideological dogmas become the framer of identity and more important than the neighbor the person is called to love.

Having looked at the two groups Hart lumps together through the four parts of my lens, we now examine these groups in light of our two questions. First, does the engagement Hart demonstrates fit the definition of identity politics as regards *ressentiment*, a narrative of marginalization, and seeking correctives for how they have been wronged? Second, how does their engagement behave in regards to the four significant concerns raised by identity politics, namely, the lack of shared vision, politicization of everything, mistreatment of the neighbors, and improper functioning of the state?

In addition to our interaction with Hunter above, which demonstrate the temptation of reducing the rationale for political engagement to *ressentiment*, Hart contributes the revivalist history and tendencies of both fundamentalists and liberals, beginning with the work of George Whitefield. Hart argues that Whitefield is most responsible for the uniquely American form of Christian engagement.

> The long-term significance of Whitefield's remarkable achievement was to make Christianity accessible to common people, rather than confining it to elites or formal ecclesiastical structures. Whitefield proved that if packaged in new wrapping and reduced to its most personal and intimate aspects, the Christian religion could attract broad support. For this reason, Whitefield deserves credit for discovering and implementing the tools that would become staples of the evangelist's trade after

> American independence. Charles G. Finney may have popularized the so-called new measures, and Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday may have adapted revivalism for big-city America, but these evangelists were only building on the foundation of Whitefield, who first figured out a way of making Christianity voluntary (e.g., conversionism) and then orchestrated a system of attracting volunteers for the Christian faith.[221]

The personalizing of the Christian faith combined with the sense of duty as "volunteers," and the stated desire to attract broad support demonstrate the alure of the revivalist tint: Christianity influenced by a superiority and a personal connection to the results of the effort. The revivalist tendencies ultimately yield the kind of *ressentiment*-laden engagement we see when the fundamentalists and liberals subscribe to the political agendas of one side over the other. By sensing (and indeed hearing and receiving from the pulpit) imperatives to demonstrate the reality of her faith, a Christian is drawn into political engagement which requires moralizing revenge from one who feels powerless.

Associated with that turn to a political agenda, the Christian is also prepared to see herself as marginalized and with goals for correctives she is exhorted to desire. As with the explanations above, she either sees herself as marginalized for being a true believer in a world that has left the true faith behind and is increasingly hostile to the faith, or she sees herself as the more relevant, but misunderstood and, by other Christians, marginalized type of Christian. In either of these temptations the challenge of finding comfort and belonging keeps the Christian looking for vindication of her faith. Unfortunately, that vindication is often found in political results rather than in Christ. Liberals and fundamentalists as described by Hart are certainly formed in a way that can lead to engagement in identity politics.

The relationship to the four challenges of identity politics is plainly understood by

[221] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 11–12.

considering the turn to the nationalist (fundamentalist) or modernist (liberal) identities, and how those identities replace the core convictions necessary to promote an avoidance of identity politics. The lack of a shared vision comes in on either side when the identity of either side becomes part of (or primarily) the mechanism through which one frames her engagement. The lack of shared vision is easily evident, as one group views nationalist tendencies and a commitment to biblical orthodoxy as the most important, and the other views modern principles informed by theological reflection as most defining. However, neither group is able to account for the other or offer a common ground or possibility of a shared vision. Further, every group has the potential to become politicized, and the Christian is implored to take up the "correct" position on the issue and thus demonstrate her faith. In the process, a truly marginalized neighbor becomes an afterthought to engagement, and when that neighbor is considered it is done from a previously-assigned politicized perspective. The actual neighbor in his particularity is ignored. Finally, in terms of the state, both sides are simply ultimately arguing for the positions of their political affinity groups, and the state itself becomes a means to an end. When seen through the framework of my fourfold lens of analysis, American Protestantism in general is on precarious ground for engaging the state while avoiding destructive aspects of identity politics.

Hart calls attention to the fact that fundamentalists and liberals are not the only kind of Christian Protestants that exist in America, and he recognizes a substantial, and even hopeful, difference between them and those whom he describes with the title "confessional Protestantism." This recognition runs against what he rightly perceived as a simplistic view wherein the only contrast in Protestant engagement was as a clash between liberals and fundamentalists. He explains: "Confessionalism represents a form of Christianity that is distinct from the predominant patterns of evangelical or mainline Protestantism because of its churchly

and corporate form of devotion."[222] A stark difference between the churches which make up the fundamentalist and liberal camps and the confessionalist camp is demonstrated in terms of their identity formation.

> For confessional Protestantism, then, the ministry of word and sacrament, catechetical instruction, and the setting apart of ministers to perform formal religious ceremonies as well as provide informal pastoral oversight, are the building blocks of Christian devotion. Creed, liturgy, and polity are not peripheral or even barriers to genuine faith, as pietist Protestants have usually regarded them, but actually define and communicate religious identity, whether to new converts or those who have grown up in the faith.[223]

In all, Hart discusses three distinct types of confessional Protestants, including Presbyterian and Reformed traditions. Significantly, the final group he examines is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which invites further reflection on what a confessional Lutheran identity might have to contribute to political engagement. In the next chapter, I turn to examine what difference the confessional faith of the LCMS may make to faithful engagement in the polis, in a way that also addresses the issues raised by the turn to identity politics in America.

[222] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 170.

[223] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 171.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUTHERAN CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARD POLITICAL IDENTITY AND ENGAGEMENT

At the end of chapter three, I briefly introduced the work of D. G. Hart in order to suggest that there are alternatives available to Christians which go beyond the binary choice of "Christian Right" and "Christian Left" so commonly seen in America today. In particular, Hart's description of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is helpful for recognizing the difference between a fundamentalist approach and a confessional approach to the Bible and, therefore, to political engagement. His chapter on the LCMS, "The Irrelevance of Lutheran Liturgy," seeks to demonstrate that the confessionalist style of engagement found in the LCMS leads to a form of pacificism (by which he means pacifism when it comes to partisan politics in the state). Hart's contention is that the LCMS's two kingdoms teaching fails to permit Lutheran engagement in the state because the LCMS is so focused on the church that the state becomes irrelevant. This characterization of the LCMS as a pacifist tradition is quite wrong as we will see below, however, he is correct in noting that the purpose of the church for confessional Lutherans is not the salvation of American culture, even if some individuals within such confessional churches might be tempted to think so.

> The oddness of Lutheran worship, then, extended as much to partisan politics as it did to musical tastes because the purpose of the church and its worship was not to save a nation or a culture but to offer forgiveness to sinners. Individual members of the LCMS, like those in other confessional traditions, have clearly been tempted by the American Protestant habit of applying the Christian faith to temporal circumstances and, no doubt, many have fallen.[1]

Hart is right to note that many individual members have fallen into the "habit of applying the Christian faith to temporal circumstances," at times losing sight of the primary goal of the church

[1] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 164.

to announce the forgiveness of sins. However, Hart's account of why the LCMS can fall into such habit is underdeveloped, especially his understanding of the two kingdoms.

Hart acknowledges that the LCMS "would appear to be an evangelical denomination in the sense that it is on the conservative side of the major division within American Protestantism," due to a shared commitment to "an unambiguous understanding of the Bible's infallible teaching on specific moral and social topics."[2] This understanding of biblical inerrancy is quite different than those in fundamentalist camps, and that the difference, says Hart, yields a different understanding of identity.

> David P. Scaer, a professor of theology at the LCMS's Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, even questions whether his denomination's endorsement of inerrancy means the same thing as it does in evangelical and fundamentalist circles. The evangelical quest for "biblical principles" that give guidance about health, wealth, marriage, families, and psychological well-being, he argues, are a long way from the Lutheran approach to Scripture in which the good news of salvation is primary and advice about daily life "belongs to natural knowledge." Scaer's point does not mean that individual Lutherans or their pastors have no interest in evangelical ways of reading or defending the Bible. But it does highlight the way in which Lutheran teachings and practices do not fit neatly the categories supplied by the mainstream Protestant divide between liberals and evangelicals. According to historian Mark Granquist, the LCMS's adoption of the language of inerrancy did not "mean that these confessional Lutherans had substantially adopted the agenda of fundamentalism" or even that they were "deeply influenced by" or "substantially agreed with" fundamentalists. "It is impossible, he adds, "to call these exclusive confessionalists 'fundamentalists' either in doctrine or approach."[3]

Hart highlights the reticence the LCMS has in fitting in with the two dominant protestant cultural narratives he described above. In particular, fundamentalists and the LCMS "held a similarly high view of the Bible, opposed evolution, and recognized liberalism as a serious breach of the Christian faith."[4] However, since the liberals and fundamentalists differed on both theological

[2] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 141.

[3] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 142.

[4] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 67.

and political issues, and from the Lutheran perspective, fundamentalists "were generally noncreedal and upset the proper boundaries between the kingdom of God (the church) and the kingdom of man (the state),"[5] the LCMS tended to join in with the fundamentalists. This joining in with the fundamentalists on the Christian Right is congruent with the work of Jeffrey Walz and Steven Montreal in *Lutheran Pastors and Politics.* In a 2001 study, they demonstrate that "LCMS Clergy are theologically and politically conservative,"[6] much as they assumed. However, they also discovered in the process that there was, as a welcome surprise, a desire among many in the clergy to become more politically active. This desire for political activity is formed by a correct understanding of the Lutheran two kingdoms teaching.

Lutherans would argue that Hart is wrong to simply identify the kingdom of God with the church and the kingdom of man with the state; however, his main point is correct: this teaching continues to separate Lutherans from others in Christianity. "Confessionalists," as he describes the LCMS, prioritized theological agreement in essentials, "[a]nd for that reason, confessionalists had little trouble deeming fundamentalism a better brand of Christianity than liberalism. But in the end, confessional Protestants were reluctant to identify with fundamentalists because it was a truncated and novel form of Christianity."[7] Maintaining Hart's distinction between confessionalists and fundamentalists is helpful. The primary reason the LCMS does not enter into altar and pulpit fellowship with other groups is because of theological differences. However, the theological differences also expose an important, underappreciated, and often forgotten divergence in our approach to politics: "Confessional Protestants were also leery of the way

[5] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 67.

[6] Walz, *Lutheran Pastors and Politics*, 18.

[7] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 67–68.

fundamentalists politicized religion or—perhaps a better way of putting it—sacralized politics."[8] Examining the Lutheran difference, and arguing that the Lutheran theological tradition has the building blocks that can inform proper political identity and engagement, in a way that avoids negative identity politics, is the plan of this chapter. To do so, I will engage with various Lutheran authors, namely Robert Benne, Joel Biermann, and Leopoldo Sánchez. Benne will offer an approach for considering political engagement which promotes orthodox theological reflection, yet allows for a range of differences of opinion in how best to implement policy. Biermann will give structure to our model, helping us understand our identity and appropriate goals for the state in terms of God's two realms through which he rules the world. Finally, Sánchez will pull all of this together in a concrete way by demonstrating the need for Lutherans to care for a particular neighbor, even one who is at risk of marginalization such as immigrants. In the process of listening to them, we will ascertain what comprises Lutheran core convictions, identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state. In the process, we will also see how two important teachings help Lutherans frame their engagement, namely, the two kingdoms framework, and vocation.

Lutheran Core Convictions

Robert Benne's Concentric Circles

As Hart noted, Lutheran Christians are focused primarily on the person and work of Jesus Christ. God's work in Christ to save sinners is the heartbeat of the Lutheran message, and for the Lutheran is the way that he understands *sola scriptura*: the Bible is about Jesus. Robert Benne, in his book *Paradoxical Vision*, demonstrates the centrality of Jesus in the Lutheran understanding,

[8] Hart, *Lost Soul*, 68.

and a model for properly understanding the placement of other elements of Christian life, from the creeds to public policy. His approach is offered as concentric circles. These circles are able to form appropriate core convictions for Lutheran engagement of the state which, when applied, help the Lutheran to avoid the tribal side of identity politics whether in terms of fundamentalism, nationalism, or opposition to other Christians.

The center of Benne's circles is that "in the unique and specific event of Jesus as the Christ—his ministry, death, and resurrection—the lost world in its entirety and for all time has been retrieved by a loving God."[9] The Christian vision expands from this core in four circles like ripples on water. The closer to the core the circle is, the more Christian agreement there should be. The further away from the core, the more room there is for disagreement. The first circle beyond the core includes what he calls "core elements of the vision," including the Ten Commandments, vocation, Christian love, and Christian doctrines such as the Trinity. The next circle deals with Christian theological reflection. These are the interpretations of the core. Here philosophy and social sciences may be used to further the application of the core to the world. The third circle is the ring of public policy, where concrete legislation is discussed. Finally, there is the circle of historical context, in which a Christian considers the various aspects of political, economic, social, and cultural life.[10]

His explanations of each circle prove helpful, and I will let him describe them in his words. As for the core, salvation by the work of Jesus the Messiah, the author notes: "This core vision ought to be held with clarity and confidence by the church. Its main elements do not change with time…Its main tenets are not negotiable if the Christian faith is to remain the Christian faith."[11]

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[9] Robert Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[10] This explanation is based on the chart provided in Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[11] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

Next,

> [C]losely related to this central religious core is the central moral vision of the Christian faith. The Ten Commandments, the calling of all Christians to faith active in love and justice, the preciousness of all created life redeemed by Christ, and the covenantal structure of God's creation (which includes the special covenant of man and woman in marriage) constitute the moral core of the Christian vision. They too are constant through time, though they must be applied creatively to each new historical situation. It is difficult to imagine authentic Christian identity without them, though they are often under attack from the world and sometimes are subverted even by religious communities themselves.[12]

Thus, the beginning of the Christian core convictions is formed by an understanding of the Bible that believes Jesus to be at the heart of the message, and that the totality of the message remains consistent over time because of the creator who established the rules.

Moving out from there, "[t]he next concentric circle away from these two inner orbs are the more speculative theological reflections of the church, including its social teachings."[13] Here we begin to see the history of application of our core vision made to the ever-changing world: "These efforts entail significant steps in moving from the core vision to its application to specific problems. Each step means an increasing chance for disagreement among Christians who hold their core vision in common."[14] We now observe that there may not be only one Christian position for many issues, even if the core is held. For this reason, Benne says: "The church needs to allow a good deal of latitude for disagreement and plurality of opinions. Its clearest litmus test should be that these extensions do not conflict with the core vision itself."[15] Multiple things can be true at the same time, and multiple policies or political actions may be God-pleasing as well.

After the reflection on engagement, which recognizes different legitimate opinions on how

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[12] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[13] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[14] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[15] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

to apply the core teaching to the world, comes a final circle in which Benne places the church's public policy responses: "Such specific commitments on the part of the church ought generally to be quite infrequent.…But in special times with regard to special issues, the church may have to take a stand for or against them."[16] In the end, "there will be much difference of opinion among intelligent Christians of goodwill on such specific policies."[17] Considering our vocations in light of this model allows us to understand the diverse needs of our neighbors, and be prepared to treat them in the way that God needs us to at that moment. For Christians, vocational diversity will also continually reinforce the center as we continually return there, to the salvific work of Jesus, and its expression in the creeds and the rule of faith, which ideally unites Christians.

So for Benne, the primary engagement is not political, but rather theological. This is important for the church to note off the bat: our political engagement is *not* primarily a political engagement. That is, Lutherans do not approach politics like other Christians, or indeed like the rest of society does. By resisting the urge to demand political agreement as a litmus test of faith, Lutherans allow for more diverse political solutions to be brought to the table. Ultimately, the only litmus test for political engagement for a Lutheran Christian is whether his political engagement is in alignment with the core truth: Jesus the Messiah as understood through the Bible and our confessions.

The difference between Lutheran theology and the theology of the Christian Right and Christian Left is stark. Whereas the political doctrine of the Christian Right is often indistinguishable from the stated goals of the Republican Party, the Lutheran may find points of agreement with the Christian Right on certain issues (for instance, on moral issues such as

[16] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

[17] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

marriage and abortion), without aligning with the Christian or secular Right (especially, on issues where there is no clear biblical mandate). Similarly, where the Christian Left is concerned about justice for vulnerable neighbors the Lutheran can find himself at home arguing for the equal dignity of all people as human creatures of God for whom Christ died and rose again, demonstrating care and concern for the marginalized neighbor, and advocating for policies designed to help those who are most in need. At the same time, the Lutheran will, testing the cares and concerns of the Christian Left against the Bible, recognize that not all aspects of the Christian or secular Left are biblically tenable either. For instance, from a traditional biblical perspective, arguing that marriage can be defined as anything other than a one man, one woman institution runs contrary to the revelation of Scripture and the confessions. So does advocating for abortion. LCMS Lutherans care about all neighbors, including the homosexual neighbor, and both the single mother and the baby in her womb, but will advocate differently than the Left on these issues. Based on the core conviction of the fifth commandment, a Lutheran can for instance rightly support anti-discrimination laws that would remove barriers that might prevent a neighbor from getting a job because of his sexual orientation (thus allowing him to support his body and life), while also advocating against the redefinition of marriage. In the abortion debate, a Lutheran may think the immediate cessation of all abortions an impossible goal, and rather than making that a political platform she may prefer to support agencies that promote adoption, or even adopt children into a Lutheran family. Lutheran theology, understood through Benne's circles, creates space for Lutherans to productively disagree on issues and advocate for neighbors, while not acquiescing to the terms that the world sets for discussion, such as either totally supporting a homosexual lifestyle or being labeled a bigot, or being either "pro-life" or "pro-choice."

Further separating the Lutheran's core convictions from that of the Christian Left and Right is the place of nationalism in our particular narratives. For Christians on the Left the telos of political engagement is an earthly realization of the eschatological reality in which justice, peace, equality and community are perfected. For Christians on the Right the telos of political engagement is either temporal victory or failure (in Gilmore's American Narrative), while anticipating vindication and reward in the millennial reign of Christ (Gilmore's Cosmic Narrative). In both of these understandings, there is a theological imperative that has found a partner political party pandering to the faithful in order to secure power and votes. Thus both the Christian Left and Right are passionately concerned with the direction America takes, and both want it to turn in opposite directions.

Lutheran theology rightly understood, however, does not make room for nationalism of this stripe. Certainly Lutherans can be patriotic, they can pledge allegiance to the flag, and even pray for their country and the soldiers fighting her wars. But Lutherans do not see in America an inherent telos that is not also the telos of Germany, Norway, Chile, Nigeria, China or Japan. The Lutheran commitment to amillennialism or inaugurated millennialism presupposes the sovereignty of God the Father hiddenly reigning in both the church and the state now in time, and, ultimately, visibly reigning over both in the future. Thus, the Lutheran approach and understanding offered by Benne is grounded in *theological* convictions which shape political action, rather than *political* convictions which necessitate placing political imperatives on theology. This distinction is expressed in the Lutheran understanding of God's "two realms,"[18]

[18] Lutheran two realms theology is a common concept, and one that has been misunderstood in the past, specifically by the Deutsch Christen in the time of Nazi Germany. In light of my comments above about Lutheran theology *not* producing a similar understanding of nationalism as the Christian Right and Christian Left in America do, it is necessary to note here that history of misunderstanding and misapplication, and also note that many have demonstrated the illegitimate use of the doctrine by the Nazis. For instance, see Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, chapters 2 and 3, but especially p. 62–65.)

which serves as a framework for understanding how Lutheran core convictions shape identity, relationship to the neighbor, and ultimately the goals for the state.

Two Realms as a Framework

Joel Biermann's *Wholly Citizens* provides such a framework in his analysis of the Lutheran two realms, or kingdoms, teaching. He notes that "[a]s with most facets of the Church's doctrine, the ideas are not complicated, and deceptively easy to state."[19] This deception of ease in the theology of the two realms has led to problems of many kinds, such as the dismissal of the teaching as simplistic or the misapplication of Luther's teaching by those who have reacted to his writings. Biermann dismantles both of those challenges in his book. Properly stating the doctrine of the two realms and demonstrating its applicability for us today is Biermann's main concern. He states what God is up to with the two realms in the past, present, and into the future:

> God reigns over his creation, which has been infiltrated and distorted by the consequences of man's rebellious sin. According to his promise, God continues to unfold his plan to restore his creation and fulfill his original design for this world. God is at work in this broken world in two distinct ways, advancing his final purposes through both the temporal realm and the spiritual realm. Each realm has a peculiar sphere of responsibility and concern: the temporal realm most interested in the present, day-to-day affairs and interactions between the different creatures occupying God's world, and the spiritual realm focused on the relationship between creatures and the Creator and the ultimate fulfillment of this world's destiny at the eschatological consummation. Within these two realms, God provides institutions and leadership to accomplish his purposes and guides this process through his multifarious and dynamic revelation...It must be noted and appreciated that God is thoroughly in control of all that occurs in either the temporal or spiritual realms. The notion that the temporal realm somehow lies outside God's concern, or is, in some sense, unredeemed and the tool of Satan is utterly rejected. Thus, the temporal realm is correctly understood as under the "left-hand rule" of God and the spiritual under the "right-hand rule" of the same God. The left hand wields the sword of justice and the right offers the grace of the Word and Sacraments.[20]

[19] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 109.

[20] Biermann, Wholly Citizens, 108.

Biermann further offers two guiding axioms for thinking about the relationship between God's two realms. The axioms are "distinction without divorce," and "cooperation without confusion."[21] His concern in the arguments above is to identify properly the two realms, temporal and spiritual, and to identify properly their one ruler, God. Holding on to these tensions, we are able to make the following statement: God's two realms accomplish the same outcome through different means. The temporal and spiritual will be fully united in the eschaton. Biermann writes,

> The point of the parallelism is that both realms operate within and according to God's overall plan for the reclamation and final restoration of his creation. On the last day, when that plan is fully consummated, the left-hand realm will not be obliterated and the right-hand realm acknowledged as the only true realm of God, after all; on that day, the state will not be wrapped into the church nor will the church be folded into the state. Rather, on that day, both state and church, and both temporal and spiritual realms with them, will be swept up together and fused again in the everlasting unity of Christ's unending glorious kingdom. Until that day, the spiritual and the temporal realms are indeed the two complementary hands of God working distinctively, yet in concert, to accomplish God's purposes for this world.[22]

A few things need noting at this point. First, although the church and state are the primary institutions of the temporal and spiritual realms, neither one should be confused with being either of the two realms in their totality. Second, while it is tempting to consider the whole of life from the individual's perspective, it would be a grave mistake to identify "The United States of America" or "The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod" respectively as "the state" and "the church," or, as should be obvious, as somehow being directly identified respectively as God's left and right hands. Even within the church, there is a left-hand element, such as property ownership. In another nation, the relationship between church and state may even not involve tax-exempt status, and in another the church may be supported by the state through taxes collected. In other words, how the church and state relate on left-hand issues is completely

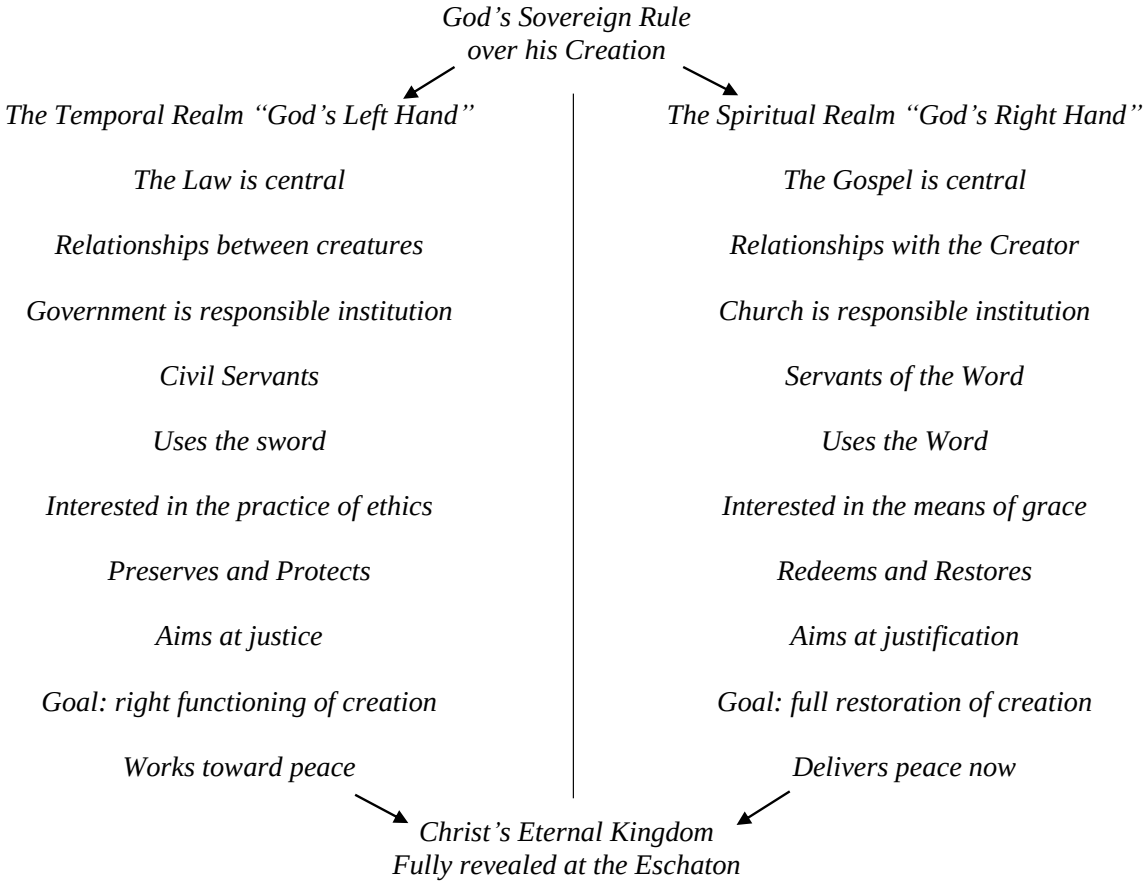
[21] Biermann, Wholly Citizens, 110.

[22] Biermann, Wholly Citizens, 112–13.

variable. Christian citizens must always take a larger picture view than simply focusing on their own local civil or ecclesial circumstances, since God is bigger than America or the LCMS; in fact, we may say that God is simply using America and the LCMS among many other countries and churches in the world as instruments through which he exercises his rule of and care for all of creation.

As American Christians, we must also recognize the vulgarity of the concept of the "separation of church and state." It is clear from our own history that neither can be fully separated from the other, but it is also theologically sound to argue that such separation is impossible any more than one hand can be separated from the body and still remain a functioning hand. God cannot separate himself in his own work toward creation. In order that we may rightly reflect on how the two work together, Biermann provides the following helpful chart.

Figure 3 Biermann's Chart[23]



Examining the chart, we notice that it begins with "God's Sovereign Rule over his Creation" at the top, and ends with "Christ's Eternal Kingdom Fully revealed at the Eschaton" at the bottom. Along the left side he notes descriptions of the Temporal Realm, and on the right contrasting descriptions of the Spiritual Realm. There is a line down the middle for clarity's sake; however, he notes that, "it should be obvious that this line is, in fact, quite permeable, and perhaps better illustrated by a broken or dashed line. While each realm bears a unique responsibility designed and entrusted by God, they are not meant to operate in isolation from one another and certainly

[23] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 110.

not in antagonism toward one another. Mutual harmony and concerted effort is the ideal."[24] So Lutherans rightly reject interpretations of Christianity that places the church above or in an antagonistic position against the church. Such an interpretation naturally leads to the temptation of identity politics when the church feels as if it is marginalized or wronged by the state. The attempts to bring about God's kingdom on earth, for instance, or a misuse or abuse of power specifically by the clergy, would be ways in which identity politics can be brought to fruition, and they are ways the Lutheran two realms understanding recognizes and avoids.

So Biermann's work gives us a framework within which to understand Benne's core convictions, and begin to apply the teaching of the two realms to our political engagement. Lutherans are prepared to agree on the essentials of faith, and from there faithfully, and sometimes differently, engage the state. As his circles expand, Benne allows room for Christians to disagree on certain topics: "Each step means an increasing chance for disagreement among Christians who hold their core vision in common. Theological reflection on society, the arts, science, and so on, and social teaching on economics, politics, and society are examples of this extension of Christian meaning. Ventures in this direction are important in the life of the church, but unanimity on them is highly unlikely."[25] Biermann demonstrates as much by applying Luther's understanding of Christian identity under God's realms to certain scenarios in order to demonstrate how faithful responses to political issues may not always play out cleanly, and how Christians may disagree in such responses. For instance, a

> Christian man convinced of his responsibility and ability to defend his countrymen against enemy threats, joins the military and sees active combat in the infantry fighting groups who plot and practice acts of terror against civilians. In another context, another man determines that the war being waged by his country falls short of the standards of a just war, and though he is aware that his claim may not be

[24] Biermann, Wholly Citizens, 114.

[25] Benne, *Paradoxical Vision*, chap. 3.

> recognized by the state or honored by others, and that he may even be jailed for his stand, nevertheless declares himself a conscientious objector and refuses to take up arms.[26]

While identity politics in the church demands uniformity to a political platform as a test of faith, Benne and Biermann demonstrate how Lutherans may legitimately disagree on various political issues because they approach them from a different starting point in the spectrum of options.

Biermann's work is also helpful to warn against extremes in political engagement. In response to identity politics, Lutheran teaching must show how it is not apolitical and thus careless about neighbors (especially, the marginalized) in the world. More specifically, Lutheran theology must show how the two realms theological framework does not foster quietism, which at least as Hart understands confessionalism and perhaps more generally as well, could be a potential problem for the confessionalist. Biermann is helpful in his criticism of quietism as an inadequate use of Luther's teaching. On the other end of the spectrum, Biermann also warns against the confusion of church and state, church-sponsored advocacy of the state, or even open rebellion of the church against the state. Maintaining the distinction between the two realms is crucial regardless of the positivity or negativity of the relationship between church and state in a given time and place.

Examining the Lutheran Model

Having sketched the outlines of a Lutheran understanding of the core convictions and the two realms framework for application thereof, we are now prepared to look at other aspects of political engagement included in our fourfold lens of analysis. We will thus offer a Lutheran

[26] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 176–77.

understanding of identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state. After we have done this, we will be able to recognize how Lutheran theology produces a different form of engagement in the polis, one which not only avoids identity politics, but offers positive alternatives in any political environment.

Lutheran Identity

Within the Lutheran two realms framework, identity can be properly understood as God's creatures living in his world. Quite simply, "the creature who has heard and (by the gracious working of God's Spirit through the gospel's proclamation) believed the word, lives life in the world now as a new creation and does the things that God created and redeemed her to do. She does God's will."[27] In order to flesh out that identity, and how one knows God's will, Biermann makes use of three Lutheran dualities: law/gospel, the two kinds of righteousness, and the two realms (or kingdoms).

Biermann observes that the unity of God's Word must be maintained in law and gospel discourses: "Law and gospel belong together as two components of God's unified and consistent word to his creation. Indeed, God's word is unitary, not schizophrenic, and the distinction between law and gospel is only relevant in the context of a fallen creation."[28] Law and gospel are revealed in the Bible, and the proper understanding of such is available to and the responsibility of those who have heard and believed the word. The author notes the proper distinction: "God's law speaks the truth of his will for the right functioning of his world, while God's gospel speaks the word of grace and forgiveness to creatures who always fall helplessly and hopelessly short of

[27] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, xvii.

[28] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, xvii.

that perfect will."[29] The Christian, just as the atheist, Muslim, or any other citizen of American, will fall helplessly and hopelessly short of God's perfect will.

Since our desire in political engagement is not to somehow become right with God, this being the work of justification and given by grace through faith, not earned through works, the Lutheran is politically primarily concerned with what is called "First Article" identity—in other words, understanding himself and the world in the light of the creator. The distinction between the two kinds of righteousness speaks to this: "A Christian is righteous before God in the vertical realm, passively, only by God's work in Christ; and that same believer then pursues a life of righteousness actively before the rest of creation in the horizontal realm."[30] Political engagement is a matter of the horizontal realm, where the Christian, knowing God's revealed law, actively strives to fulfill it, though he will never do so perfectly.

Finally, in the two kingdoms, as noted above, we see the all-encompassing reign of God through all things temporal (the realm of the left) and spiritual (the right). In other words, everything, identity, relationship to the neighbor, goals for the state, even political engagement itself, falls under the purview of God. Since everything God expects of his creation (since the Fall and until the eschaton) falls under the temporal realm, it should not be surprising that God cares passionately about our behavior in the temporal realm. Indeed, this is part and parcel of his directives to his creatures.

> A much more significant point arising from Luther's pithy sentence is the final assertion: "the temporal estate is an ordinance of God which everyone ought to obey and honor." This is the essential point from which all else springs. The material world of creation that surrounds us is God's work and still matters to God. It is temporal, indeed, but it is precious to God. Since it matters to God, he provides for its protection and care by establishing what Luther here calls the temporal estate: the rulers and governments who are accountable for the well-being and right functioning

[29] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, xvii.

[30] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, xvii.

> of that material, temporal world in which we all live, and in which the spiritual estate carries out its work. The temporal estate is not wicked, tawdry, or suspect. It is not opposed to God or to the spiritual estate. It is not even a necessary evil as a consequence of the brokenness of sin infecting the creation. There is nothing negative or regrettable about the temporal estate. It is simply God's provision for the smooth functioning of creation.[31]

Whether intentional or not, Biermann demonstrates the difference between the Lutheran understanding and that of Hunter's three groups: "purity from," "defensive against," and "relevance to." In contrast to the "purity from" group, Lutherans do not view the state suspiciously, but rather as part of God's left realm of ruling. In contrast to the "defensive against" group, Lutherans do not view the state in terms of opposition, but rather as fellow creatures who have responsibilities to fulfill. In contrast to the "relevance to" group, Lutherans do not view the state as primarily charged with righting the wrongs of sinful creation by prescribing equality of outcomes or implementing social justice before finally disappearing when all is put in place. Lutheran identity is truly a dual-citizenship: seriously passionate about God's reign in both temporal matters, including the localities in which he lives, and in spiritual matters, the place where he is reminded that this home is not our final home.

Remembering our definition of identity politics in chapter two, namely, a *ressentiment*-induced engagement with politics whereby the primary motive for interaction is the correcting of perceived wrongs for a particular group united by the particular identity which believes itself to be marginalized, we can see how the Lutheran approach is able to avoid this kind of political engagement. First, the Lutheran approach to engagement does not carry with it any sense of the "moralizing revenge of the powerless," but rather a creaturely indebtedness to the Creator. Knowing that God is sovereign over all things, even things that oppose his will, leads the

[31] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 4–5.

Lutheran not to political anger, but rather to repentance and faithful living and witness. Second, the correcting of perceived wrongs may well be on the Lutheran's agenda, but it is not the primary motive he carries. Rather, the primary motive of the Lutheran is to clearly articulate and apply God's law in the temporal realm, of which the state is only a part. Thus, the Lutheran recognizes the necessity of right living, and that it is every bit as, if not more important than, the way his non-Christian neighbor or ruler lives. Finally, there is no concept of marginalization present in this understanding. Indeed, the Christian feels, if anything, a sense of privilege by being a dual-citizen and knowing the peace of the gospel. Although conflict with the unbelieving world is expected, it does not lead the Lutheran to a "woe-is-me" understanding, but rather demonstrates again his reliance on the Savior, even in the face of sharp disagreement.

In Hunter's "defensive against" model, we saw one possible response to the face of sharp disagreement with the world, and we argued that the response was wrong because it ultimately can turn to identity politics. Biermann argues that the disagreement is not recognized and dealt with in the church because quite often the church has forgotten her identity which is formed outside of the culture: "The problem is not that the church has failed to figure out how to confront the normal nihilism that surrounds it on all sides. The problem—indeed, the crisis for the church—is that the normal nihilism that names and norms our culture is not just 'out there.' It is firmly entrenched in our pews and in our own pulpits."[32] In other words, the church becomes susceptible to the ways of the world when she forgets her proper identity: "When the church, along with her ministers, is confused about her own identity, the story that defines and guides her will be equally confused…or absent altogether."[33] However, a robust and proper understanding

[32] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 190.

[33] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 190.

of the two realms appreciates and attends to all of God's creation even when the church finds herself at war with the world. And it does so in such a way that it avoids the pitfalls of a lack of shared vision by taking the present seriously, or the problem of operating out of *ressentiment* by avoiding the lure of divisive political rhetoric.

> The Christian story puts the church at odds with the world around. Of course, it should always be borne in mind that the Christian story is, in fact, God's story—one that begins before the first word of creation and continues through the eschatological consummation into eternity. To live the Christian story is simply to hear God's call and to receive all that he gives through his living Word, delivered in the means entrusted to his church. Concurrently, to live the Christian story is to endure the continual barrage of attacks stemming ultimately from Satan and serving God's plan (his story for us) by driving us at last further into the enduring grace of Christ, our only hope in the face of what Luther termed our *anfechtung*. Conflict between God's story and the world's false stories is inevitable. It cannot be otherwise. The story that the church has been given to tell does not accommodate itself to the wider culture. The church cannot abridge and censor her own story to mollify the sensitivities of normal nihilists. The church does not tolerate false stories. And as every Western citizen knows, a lack of tolerance is, in our world, the unpardonable sin. To embrace and live the Christian story…is to be at war.[34]

To summarize, the Lutheran two realms teaching allows Lutherans to formulate a proper understanding of everything, of life in creation. There is nothing that is not ruled by our God. This means that rulers, nations, laws, and the church all fall under his sovereign reign, and all ultimately fulfill the purposes and plans he has for them. The Christian properly sees himself as a citizen of the left realm, and dutifully lives out his Christian faith by means of submitting to God, and the emperor. In the process he will often times find himself rightly at odds with the world. This is to be expected, and properly responded to. Having an identity set as a creature with eyes firmly set to the eschaton, the Lutheran is prepared to live as God's mouthpiece, though doing so while avoiding the pitfalls of identity politics.

[34] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 191.

Relationship to the Neighbor

The Christian's identity as a creature of God necessitates that she also views her fellow humans, her neighbors, as fellow creatures. The Christian's relationship to the neighbor is not contingent upon any other quality or identity. For dealings in the temporal realm, it matters not whether the neighbor is a Christian, whether there is agreement in political convictions, or whether the neighbor is even a citizen or resident of the same country. Armed with this understanding, the Christian is able to display Christian love for the neighbor according to the means and manner that God has called her to use for such purpose. This Christian love for the neighbor extends to each neighbor, as it is formed by the core convictions, and given concrete opportunity in living the Christian life in God's two realms.

Lutherans have occasionally faced the charge of quietism, or pacificism in Hart's telling. Yet within the two realms framework, and specifically through the understanding of vocation, these charges are rendered false. Quietism is a twisted application of Lutheran teachings, and is readily avoided when considering what the Christian is to be about doing in the polis. In this regard, the language of rights—so commonly used among Americans—should be carefully negotiated among Christians. The Christian understands rights, not as freedom to do as one pleases, but as gifts from God to serve others—rights which realistically the state can only hope to secure at some proximate level for those who live in it. Ultimately, Biermann argues that the Christian does not approach politics with the goal of securing his own rights, rather the Christian approaches the state on behalf of the neighbor so that she is not denied those gifts from God that promote the flourishing of life, either by nefarious ruling, or through a blind spot in the application of justice within the state. Thus, arguing for one's individual or group rights is not the object of a Christian's involvement in politics, but rather securing for one and all the blessings of God: "So, while the believer does not assert her right to life or liberty or even think

in terms of her own rights, she will work tirelessly to assure the gifts of life and liberty to those who are being denied these gracious privileges."[35] The church, and her members, understand their identity and the identity of their neighbors within the core convictions, and act politically on behalf of the neighbor. The Lutheran is not apolitical at all!

Yet the charge of quietism has been raised, and such quietism could render a result equally as bad as identity politics if it leads to an inappropriate or incomplete engagement with the state for the benefit of neighbors (including the neighbor other). Biermann deals with this charge occasionally throughout his book, and looking at a few of those spots will help us understand how the teaching that Luther articulated not only avoids quietism, but actually calls a Christian to correct political activity. It is necessary that we engage this here because inappropriately viewing the neighbor is a sinful proposition. Abusing the neighbor is a sin of commission against God and neighbor; and quietism is a sin of omission against God and neighbor. Luther took pains to make sure neither were allowed to happen.

> The stark simplicity and compelling force of Luther's argument often engenders a measure of anxiety. An immediate and understandable concern that asserts itself is the possible abuse of the teaching. Is it not possible that a pastor could become consumed with politics and the gospel's proclamation be eclipsed? Could it be that a prince would claim the divinity of his office as license for great wickedness? Might a nation of believers be lulled into quietism and inaction by their wrong understanding of the distinction between the two realms? None of these concerns is idle fancy. All have been realized in history.[36]

Thus the challenge has long been levied, and falling into sin is quite readily available for humans. In each of these instances sinful people have misused God's clear teachings in Scripture. Yet the truth of Scripture must be taught regardless of the results or misuse by poor theologians. Thus, Bierman notes that:

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[35] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 170–71.

[36] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 27.

> sloppy, inept, inaccurate, or careless teaching is never excused, and bears its own consequences. But not even rebelling peasants, self-indulgent rulers, or apathetic citizens can be cited as just cause to alter the forthright teaching of God's truth. Faithful teaching must profess the truth of God's Word as it is given.[37]

So the first point against Lutheran teaching yielding quietism is that while it is true that some have misunderstood their role, the Christian is still charged with faithfully teaching the Word of God.

In a second section, Biermann is engaging the work of Paul Althaus who discredited the myth that Lutheran theology led to the abuses of the Third Reich in Germany. Biermann notes how "Althaus emphasizes repeatedly that Luther's own actions belied the notion that the reformer somehow spawned quietism and servile compliance as he regularly held princes accountable to God's moral law."[38] The implications for the two realms are far reaching, not only for the princes, but for the common citizen as well, especially when the common citizen has the rare opportunity in history to actively participate in government. For Luther, however, pastors especially were called to hold the civil leaders accountable in adhering to God's law because it was at that point that the political and preaching offices encounter each other![39] Christians speak before leaders on behalf of their neighbors in need. To be clear, more than just having the correct teachings, a Christian is implored to hold their leaders accountable to God's law in their dealings with the people.

Finally, Biermann offers a roll call of theologians who "emphasize different aspects and nuances of Luther's teaching, but none offers support to any thoughts of complete separation, quietism, or autonomous spheres."[40] Instead, as Biermann briefly summarizes each theologian's

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[37] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 28–29.

[38] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 63.

[39] See Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 63.

[40] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 69.

import, a theme of interdependency between church and state emerges. Richard John Neuhaus advocates that "the temporal realm, including the government of that realm, was worthy of the church's attention and effort."[41] Uwe Siemon-Netto demonstrates "that a right understanding of Luther's teaching can never be bent to condone quietism, yet neither must it eventuate in ardent advocacy for standard Enlightenment-bred liberal cultural and society standards and ambitions."[42] Craig Nessan offers the goal "that Christians would do God's will 'by living responsibly not only by testifying to the Gospel of Jesus Christ but at the same time by active political engagement.'"[43] The state needs the church, and the church needs the state. So rather than quietism, Lutherans actively engage their society, holding leaders accountable to God, and confidently holding on to God's Word and teaching, even when other Christians misuse or misunderstand it. And they do this all on behalf of their neighbor.

Service on behalf of the neighbor is further explained by what Biermann describes as Luther's second breakthrough.

> The second breakthrough is the importance, and more than that, the beauty of fulfilling the work that God gives each person by virtue of that specific person's relationships and responsibilities in life. It would come to be called the doctrine of vocation. For Luther, the foundation for understanding and fulfilling a vocation must be the realities of birth, marriage, work, and community. In other words, the places and roles in which a person lives are the setting, the definition and direction, and the meaning of one's purpose in life–one's vocations. The person who does such things, does God's will, and thus, honors his Creator and serves well his fellow creation.[44]

Faithful living as a Christian in both realms, and in each of his vocations, requires the Christian to begin consideration of his engagement within the core convictions discussed above, namely,

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[41] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 70.

[42] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 71.

[43] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 71. Here he quotes Nessan, Craig L., "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 309–10.

[44] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 150.

the person and work of Jesus, the Bible, the Creeds and the like, then to live actively in pursuit of those convictions on behalf of the neighbor.

This also fits nicely with the Lutheran understanding of identity of both the self and the neighbor as creatures of God. Again, Biermann is helpful in demonstrating that any Christian working to accomplish the work presented by her vocations is doing what God desires of her.

> Created not to flee the world, but to serve it as a responsible and careful ruler of creation, one lives according to God's purpose when one engages with this world, undertaking and fulfilling the tasks of various vocations with purpose. Seen from the perspective of the two realms, a Christian who works to accomplish her vocations is simply striving to meet her creaturely responsibilities within God's good temporal realm. The work she does is certainly God-pleasing, and significant in its own right by virtue of the fact that it serves the temporal realm…Whether at home, at work, in the government, or in the church, the believer strives to use the gifts and talents given for the good of those around.[45]

Again, the Christian creature lives in a relationship made right by God through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and lives on behalf of her neighbors freed to serve them in God-pleasing ways, guided by core convictions, always pointing unabashedly to the truth, caring for them, and exhorting the government to do right, according to God's Word, by the neighbor. In terms of identity politics, the Lutheran approach to the neighbor presents a significant opportunity for proper and fruitful engagement. Looking at vocation and God's work in the two realms, an important question is raised, and it is one which deserves more consideration: How does the church positively respond and advocate on behalf of neighbors whose needs might be dismissed in society and church but are recognized in identity politics? In the third section of this chapter, below, I will examine this question in light of the work of Leopoldo Sánchez. But before we do that, let us reflect on what Lutheran theology contributes to our understanding of Christian engagement with the state.

[45] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 152.

Goals for the State

Lutheran goals for the state are always both rigorous and modest. They are rigorous in the sense that Lutherans aim for the right functioning of creation according to God's law, and they do so on behalf of the neighbor as a fellow creature. However, they are always modest because the Lutheran's aim is not to establish a Christian state (in any case, the state is already under the purview and care of God). Further, the reality of sin in this fallen world, and the fact that much of the work done in the state is often creating policies not clearly or specifically spoken to in Scripture, necessitates the Lutheran to properly distinguish where and how to speak to the state. He is not a quietist. Indeed, a Lutheran may well speak his opinion on matters in which there is neither a clear-cut solution to an issue nor a biblical imperative about said issue. Admittedly, even in such a situation, one would still expect that a Christian's opinion is well-informed by a theological framework seen through the lens of his various vocations. This opining, however, must be clearly distinguished from holding a clear position on issues which carry greater theological significance because they are more directly addressed in Scripture. In such "clear cut" cases, the Lutheran must speak God's truth when proposed legislation runs contrary to God's law and thus impacts the neighbor negatively. Thus a Lutheran's goals for engaging the state are determined by the degree of clarity to which God's truth and thus core convictions address the laws and policies of the state.

Biermann pictures the two realms working together: "The state does not compete with the church or vice versa, but each operates in concert with the other for the good of creation."[46] Further, the leaders in both realms are held accountable by God for their actions in each, and thus they find their proper orientation for engagement in God's creation.

[46] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 111.

> Civil servants act as God's left-hand sword-bearers striving to establish and uphold justice in the world; and servants of the Word deliver the forgiveness of sins and new life through the means of grace, and so, bring the reality of justification to creatures lost and dead in sin and failure. With its attention riveted on the world around it and committed to the right functioning of that world, the temporal realm works to preserve and protect God's creation; at the same time, the right-hand realm is equally concerned about that world, but it is not content until the whole creation has been fully restored to the intent of God and the redeeming work of Christ has been completed.[47]

Thus, for Biermann, there are but two goals that the church implores the state to aim for: peace and justice, both properly understood as formed by the core convictions.

In a properly functioning world, the church is able to focus on being the church, and the temporal concerns are taken care of by the temporal institutions, including the state taking care of political issues for all people. There are certainly times that the church may speak to the state, but those times must not become distractions to the main purpose and work of the church. In other words, the church must never be seen primarily as a political institution: "When the church becomes distracted by temporal concerns or preoccupied with goals and purposes properly within the purview of the left-hand realm, the gospel is neglected, and in time, will be forsaken."[48] For Biermann, the most important thing that the church can do for the sake of the state, and indeed for the sake of everything, is to be the church. Biermann argues that "simply by being a faithful community or congregation of believers that gathers for worship and then guides individual Christians to live out the reality of God's truth, both law and gospel, in ordinary daily life and routine, the church makes its most important impact on the world."[49]

So, the Lutheran goals for the state are modest, yet all consuming; rigorous, yet approachable. Lutherans desire a world in which peace and justice are true goals of the state, that

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[47] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 111–12.

[48] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 116.

[49] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 117.

is, a world in which the fulfillment of God's law results in justice for all—although that goal is neither the only nor ultimate goal, because the final word belongs to the gospel.

> The pastor, then, becomes the messenger of that law to the temporal realm. The critical thing is not only to recognize but also to appreciate the fact that the temporal realm with its focus on justice and upholding God's law is its own legitimate end. When it fulfills its responsibilities, it does God's work. Thus, a pastor can, at times, join in that good and godly work for its own sake. He can assert the law of God, call officials to conform to that law, urge the cause of justice, and knowingly refrain from speaking the gospel of grace and justification in that situation. When the goal is to support the work of the temporal realm, the last word in that context is the law. Of course, when the goal is the full and final restoration of the entire creation and the complete healing of the relationship between creature and Creator, and creature and all other creatures, the last word is always the gospel. So, the pastor needs to know in which realm he serves at any given moment, and the goal appropriate to each situation.[50]

Although the above was written about the role of the pastor, it is good advice for all Christians on how they should consider their work in the state. Keeping various Lutheran paradigms in mind—such as law and gospel and the two kinds of righteousness—allows one to faithfully engage the state without making engagement with the state somehow contingent upon salvation. Thus, a Lutheran approach is radically different from the approach of the Christian Right or Left, either of which demands the demonstration of faith by action, and the goals for the state follow suit. Rather than seeking to make a Christian nation, which can become a form of identity politics when nationalism is combined with narratives of *ressentiment*, such as we saw in chapter three, Lutheran convictions recognize that all things, including even Islamic states, for instance, already belong to God and need not be "Christianized" or "baptized" to fall under His ruling. The Christian response to political engagement then is to exhort the government to follow what is already true, even if the government officially denies the fact that it serves only at the will and by the provision of the Creator.

[50] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 133.

Summarizing Lutheran Engagement

Having examined Lutheran core convictions and how they affect identity, relationship to the neighbor and goals for the state, in accordance with our fourfold lens of analysis, we are now prepared to answer the questions that help us determine the relationship between Lutheran theology and identity politics. I will argue that not only is properly understood Lutheran theology not susceptible to the trappings of identity politics, but it actually provides a way to respond constructively to challenges raised by identity politics—the question raised at the end of our examination of the relationship to neighbors in Lutheran two realms theology.

First, does Lutheran engagement fit the definition of identity politics regarding *ressentiment*-induced engagement, a narrative of marginalization, and the seeking of correctives? Quite clearly, the answer is no. For Lutherans, *ressentiment* is not an option. Whereas *ressentiment* functions politically as the moralizing revenge of the powerless, Lutheran theology neither envisions politics as a power struggle between, for example, good and evil, or church and state, or any other dichotomy. Rather, Lutherans view politics as an activity of the temporal realm in which God accomplishes his desires for the world. Certainly, there are sinful people with sinful agendas and the Lutheran teachings will speak against those agendas when they result in opposition to God's law or injustice being committed against a neighbor. However, the Lutheran response is not constructed from a position of powerlessness, but from a positive perspective. This does not mean that the church's life in the temporal state might not bring about suffering and the cross, but the church's response to this state of affairs should be motivated not by revenge but by faithfulness to God and love of neighbor in his two realms.

This positive perspective is formed by two forces at work within Lutheran theology. On the one hand, Lutherans understand that God is sovereignly reigning over all things, even the things that seem to be going against his will. Thus, when Lutherans find decisions made by government

to be inappropriate, they speak up, clearly and appropriately articulating God's expectations, yet they refuse to fight sinful behavior by resorting to the weaponry of this world, such as the tribal and at times antagonistic ways of identity politics. Knowing that God is sovereign over all things, and indeed is working through all things for the benefit of those whom he has called (Rom 8:28), the Christian does not despair when God's law is not accomplished. The second force at work in Lutheran theology is the reality that the victory has already been won, and the church's responsibility is to proclaim that victory. In proclamation, the church points the neighbor always to the gospel which has the final word. Rather than sacralizing politics, Lutherans anticipate the coming eschaton when all things will be brought into order precisely and correctly as God desires. In the meantime, the church strives for fidelity to God's teachings, and advocates on behalf of the neighbor. Thus, the Lutheran aim is not to seek correctives for which they have been wronged, but rather to use their formative theological perspective for good as those who are shaped by God's full revelation in the Bible to advocate for God's will to be accomplished on behalf of all creatures.

The second question for examination regards how Lutheran engagement behaves in regards to the four significant concerns raised by identity politics, namely, the lack of shared vision, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of the marginalized neighbors, and the improper functioning of the state. I will look at each of these individually, and demonstrate that the Lutheran perspective avoids each of those temptations, while offering promising building blocks for addressing the state as it struggles with each of these concerns.

The fact that there is a lack of shared political vision is not surprising, nor is it new, nor am I foolish enough to suggest that a properly promoted Lutheran view would guarantee a shared vision. Even within the church, as demonstrated above, there are competing understandings of

what the state should accomplish, and both the Christian Right and Left hold valid portions of the totality of the Christian message. The Lutheran model, however, proves to be much more promising as it not only incorporates the concerns of both groups—respectively, the desire of God to have his moral laws followed, and for justice to be a goal strived for on behalf of all people—but also offers an all-inclusive narrative to the world through its two realms teaching. The Lutheran model thus serves in such a way as to be applicable for all forms of government, in all times, and in all places. It is not contingent upon a government being favorable to the church, nor does it demand the understandings of the world promoted within liberalism. Indeed, Biermann contends that the properly functioning church is applicable for all times and situations, but a wrongly functioning church is not when:

> the church compromises its unique identity and work in the world as the proclaimer of the gospel of Jesus Christ and alienates and disgusts those who need to hear that news by presenting itself to the world as just one more special interest group jostling for an opening where it can insert its hungry snout at the public trough and fawning over power-brokers with its hand out. The church must never succumb to such groveling. Considering the current climate in the United States, it seems that the revocation of the church's tax-exempt status is simply a matter of time. Perhaps it is time now for the church to accept and even welcome this inevitability and start planning and acting accordingly. Indeed, a church faithful to its work would only serve to hasten the coming of that day–the contemporary Western world has little patience for those who will not abide its rules and expectations for appropriate behavior. And a church that declares the exclusivity of Christ's truth and the universality and permanence of God's moral law will certainly be deemed inappropriate in the enlightened culture of twenty-first-century America.[51]

For Lutherans, the goal is not to establish a society, culture, or state wherein God's kingdom may come. Rather, the Lutherans aim to promote the overarching story of everything that God has revealed, and, trusting God to work things out, do so faithfully and boldly even at great personal harm.

[51] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 121.

Here it is necessary to point out a fatal flaw in the political thinking common to many American Christians, namely, that idea that the role of the church is to offer a shared vision for America. In a sinful and fragmented world, there is in reality no way to guarantee a shared political vision for America, and no philosophical, political, or religious system will be able to provide one. A democracy where "every vote counts" and where "diversity" is one of the highest ideals fosters a wide range of opinions that are held by people who inhabit the same land, and within a range of opinions and competing interests there is hardly a shared vision. Even when one considers the domination of our political language in terms of the two-party system, one finds at best two competing visions of American life. Dissention in countries ruled by communism or fascism point out the inability to offer a shared vision even by political force or the elimination of competing voices. Furthermore, one needs only to consider the various divisions of the "one" Christian church to recognize that even among churches there are different visions for political engagement (as we noted in the previous chapter). The question then is not how Lutheran theology provides a shared vision for America in a world of identity politics (it cannot), but rather how a Lutheran theological identity grounded in God's story of his rule in his two realms shapes the Christian's relationship to her fellow creatures in an imperfect world.

First, the Lutheran approach calls Lutherans to live faithfully in God's world, not allowing other concerns or identities to set the agenda for their political engagement. In this way, the Lutheran is not primarily accountable to anyone other than God for how he thinks or acts. Indeed, the Lutheran is also accountable to the church and government, but this is because God has instituted these orders—his primary allegiance is always to God. Second, the Lutheran approach is better thought of as the Christian story of God's rule of the world in his two realms. That is, the Lutheran story is a story of God's work in his creation from the first word of creation

to the consummation of all things. All creatures at all times are part of this story, whether they recognize it or not, because all are creatures of our God and King. Thus, God's story is for all, even if they do not share this story with us, and in reality we expect that many will not. However, for the Lutheran, the fact that the outside world does not yet agree with the story does not make the story any less true, nor lessen her obligation to speak and live according to its truth in her political engagement in the state.

Is the goal of the church's proclamation of God's story of everything to produce a shared vision for life in America? Obviously not. Yet as Biermann reminds us, the church can speak God's truth to all who will hear concerning his design and intention for his created orders.

> Within God's great design for his creation, every part, every person, every institution has its peculiar role, and can rightly fulfill that role only as it conforms to the intention of the Creator. The world must know this truth. As those particularly interested in God's truth, it falls to the church to shoulder the responsibility of making known the will of God for his creation.[52]

The Lutheran perspective always has God's eternal purposes for his creation in mind, and is never singularly focused on the results of any particular institution, including the state, or piece of legislation. A focus on the end results, rather than penultimate temporal gains, gives Lutherans a long view of reality in God's creation that is desperately needed in our present time. And yet, even as Christians anticipate the eschaton, when God will restore a broken and fragmented creation, the Christian lives now according to God's story in his two realms, serving neighbors through his vocations.

In regards to the politicization of everything, the Lutheran perspective similarly offers hope to the world by having a different model of engagement. The Christian Left and Right, by being so firmly entrenched with the Democratic and Republican Parties, are easily drawn into political

[52] Biermann, *Wholly Citizens*, 92.

skirmishes over things that need not be political or politicized. Worse, as we have seen, these political skirmishes create opportunities for unnecessary division and fracturing of relationships among Christians, and therefore between Christ and his church, especially as the increasingly political nature of the church alienates people who are in need of the gospel message. Again, the solution is not to be apolitical, and a Lutheran is not. However, the Lutheran model is able to provide necessary discretion, specifically in the form of the core convictions. When the church speaks on political matters, it speaks authoritatively, not as just another voice. And it does so without threat or coercion. The Lutheran approach provides the church latitude on when to speak and when not to speak (as in the farthest rings of Benne's circles), but even more importantly it gives the Christian a guide on how to speak. The church speaks only on occasion and about issues clearly articulated in the core convictions, and in doing so the church speaks for God. If the church speaks in the same manner on matters farther and farther away from the core, it does so inappropriately. By removing the concept of "the Christian position" from the vernacular of our identity-politics-charged national discourse, the church thus regains its voice and is able to maintain its distinctive mission. The church properly engages the state by demonstrating what is properly political, rather than politicizing everything.

In identity politics there is a legitimate concern for the mistreatment of the marginalized neighbor. The two realms theology of Lutherans provides us a model in which all neighbors are truly equally valued, a position that is untenable in modern American politics. As demonstrated above, the Lutheran model views the neighbor not primarily in terms of ethnicity, political preference, or other identity-driven aspect. Instead, the Lutheran model sees all neighbors as creatures of the same Creator, equally deserving objects of his love, and equally requiring the gifts of God in the church and the state. Thus, a Lutheran does not consider her relationship to

the neighbor in primarily political terms, or in simplistic dualities that are prone to identity politics style engagement. The neighbor is not a political football to be battled over, but a creature who presents the opportunity to demonstrate to the world God's love for them through both law and gospel, in matters both temporal and spiritual. Lutherans reject the mistreatment of marginalized neighbors and, as we will see with Leopoldo Sánchez momentarily, welcome the opportunity to advocate for their needs before the state.

Finally, as is readily apparent, the Lutheran model is highly interested in the right functioning of the state, regardless of the form of government the state takes. In terms of American engagement, therefore, the Lutheran model is not contingent upon the Constantinian semi-unified relationship of church and state, and therefore is able to maintain its confidence in standing not in terms of seeking power, but rather in terms of its all-powerful Lord who is over all things. More clearly, the church does not endorse the ends of the liberalism project which have resulted in identity politics, even within the church, by subscribing to buzzwords which are not defined by reality. Liberty, for instance, is not freedom from all constraints, but rather understood within Lutheran thought. Liberty is freedom from eternal judgment, and thus freedom to love and serve the neighbor. In the meantime, the church also recognizes that the right functioning of the state is contingent upon its adherence to God's law, as ultimately that is the only thing which can provide the needed, proper, and full direction that God's creation needs prior to the eschaton. Lutheran theology is either congruent with the story of everything in which God creates, preserves, and restores creation in his two realms, or it is fully irrelevant to the question of engaging the world. Since Lutheran theology, particularly in the framework of God's two realms encompasses everything, it has an interest in the right functioning of everything, which is defined by the Creator of everything, and thus Lutheran theology promotes the right

impetus for participating in the functioning of all things.

For all of these reasons, Lutheran theology is not compatible with the American turn to identity politics, and Lutherans who engage in identity politics are neglecting their own theology, and therefore neglecting God's call to serve neighbor rightly. There is more. Not only does Lutheran theology reject the ugly side of identity politics, but by taking seriously the concerns of those who turn to identity politics, Lutheran theology presents an opportunity to demonstrate true Christian love for the neighbor, and thus respond to concerns in ways that render the four problems raised by identity politics void. A model that promotes shared vision and community, minimal politicization, the right treatment of neighbors (including the other), and the proper functioning of the state is precisely what is needed and what Lutheran theology offers.

Lutheran Theology in Action

Up to this point I have argued the theoretical ability of Lutheran two realms theology to both avoid identity politics and constructively care for the neighbor whose needs are highlighted in the turn to identity politics. I this section, I will move beyond the theoretical to a more concrete application of Lutheran two realms theology, demonstrating how it moves beyond identity politics to proper and faithful Christian engagement. In particular, the work of Leopoldo Sánchez on immigration issues will demonstrate the ability of Lutheran theology to properly place the concerns of both liberal and conservative expressions of Christian thought within a broader narrative of God's work in his two realms and through vocations. Along with the Christian Left, Sánchez demonstrates the need to care for all neighbors, including the marginalized. With the Christian Right, Sánchez demonstrates the need to adhere to the law of the nation in which one resides as long as it is not contrary to core convictions laid out in God's Word. In order to make the distinction clearer, I will first demonstrate the ease with which

Christians, particularly the Christian Right, can fall into identity politics, specifically in relation to immigration. This will serve as a foil to the Lutheran model of engagement with immigration which will follow.

The Christian Right and Immigration

In chapter two, I noted that the recent turn to identity politics was Mark Lilla's diagnosis of "what went wrong" in the Democratic party, which in turn allowed Donald Trump to be elected President of the United States. For him, the turn to myriad identity groups left the Democratic Party with no clear or compelling message—no unified voice. Meanwhile, on the Christian Right, there was a sense in which identity politics seemed positive. First, if Lilla is correct, it weakened their opponents on the political left. Second, Christians on the Christian Right were able to celebrate the leader they believed God appointed.

One of the largest campaign issues in the 2016 election was immigration, specifically immigration happening across the southern border of the United States. Immigration is also an issue that can easily lend itself to identity politics. Into that context, then-candidate Trump offered a simple, nationalistic, response: "Build the wall." Supporters of Trump believed this solution to promote a defense of American sovereignty. Some from the Christian Right could easily defend the proposition as a matter of obedience to the rule of law, at times imploring an understanding of the fourth commandment, "honor your father and your mother," which, when extrapolated, includes all authorities. Opponents of Trump believed the proposed wall to be detrimental to the health and well-being of migrants, and specifically asylum seekers, who needed to be physically cared for and safe in a new homeland. For those in the Christian Left, the appeal against a border wall proposal would often include some form of appeal to the fifth commandment, "you shall not murder," which, when extrapolated, includes negligence done to

the neighbor by not meeting his needs. Both sides have valid, Christian points, and indeed, both of their concerns are represented in Lutheran core convictions. Proper deliberation on this challenge would push us beyond the turn to identity politics, as we will see momentarily. For now, I wish to demonstrate one final time the ease with which Christians can be lured into identity politics.

Rev. Robert Jeffress is a Southern Baptist pastor from Dallas, Texas, and an ardent supporter of President Trump. Indeed, he campaigned with and for President Trump throughout his run for office in 2016. On Inauguration Day 2017, Rev. Jeffress delivered a sermon at a private religious service at St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. The sermon was published by Time Magazine.[53] While the entire text of the sermon is a rhetorical weaving together of God's design and man's desire culminating in this moment, the particular overtones of identity politics, specifically as it relates to the political battlelines of open-borders and nationalism, make this sermon particularly troubling, and should leave the reader of this dissertation longing for a better approach.

Jeffress opens his remarks with a story about flying around with then-candidate Trump, and recalls that "I said that I believe that you would be the next President of the United States. And if that happened, it would be because God had placed you there. As the prophet Daniel said, it is God who removes and establishes leaders. Today—one year later—God has raised you and Vice-President-elect Pence up for a great, eternal purpose."[54] Here, Jeffress mixes the Cosmic and American Narratives that Gilmore referenced above, seeing America as playing a role in

[53] Time Magazine Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard Before Becoming President," *Time Magazine*, January 20, 2017, https://time.com/4641208/donald-trump-robert-jeffress-st-john-episcopal-inauguration/.

[54] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

establishing God's kingdom on earth. Next, Jeffress compares Trump to the biblical builder Nehemiah who, Jeffress argues, is like Trump in that both were raised up by God as "a powerful leader to restore the nation."[55] It is no mistake that Jeffress chose this character, for as in Trump's proposal, there was a mandate to building a wall. Thus, Jeffress opines: "And the first step of rebuilding the nation was the building of a great wall…You see, God is NOT against building walls!"[56] Thus far in the sermon we have seen the core convictions of the American and Cosmic Narratives and an appeal to a particular goal, that of building the border wall.

Jeffress continues by exhorting three principles from Nehemiah's leadership for Trump to emulate, namely 1) "Nehemiah Refused To Allow His Critics To Distract Him," 2) "Nehemiah refused To Allow Setbacks To Stop Him," and 3) "Nehemiah Sought God's Help To Empower Him."[57] In Jeffress's telling, these principles would make Trump successful, like Nehemiah, "in building the wall and rebuilding the nation."[58] At this point, the role that *ressentiment* plays in forming the Christian Right engagement becomes clear, and the resulting strained relationships emerge as well.

First, Jeffress emphasizes that Nehemiah refused to be distracted by criticism. Indeed, the fact that Nehemiah faced criticism and refused to stop his work to talk with his critics is proof for Trump and Pence that they too must focus on their mission without paying attention to their critics. Jeffress implores them, you "and your team have been called by God and elected by the people to do a great work. It is a work far too important to stop and answer your critics."[59] The

[55] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

[56] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

[57] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

[58] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

[59] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

door is open for an antagonistic attitude towards fellow citizens and residents who disagree with the President or his followers on public policy. Although Jeffress does not offer not much in the way of specifics as to what that work is, just that it is great, within the Christian Right narrative the work includes preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus, and apparently building a wall is part of accomplishing this work. For Lutherans, not only is this bad theology as it expects humans to be able to usher in the second coming of Jesus, and it mistreats the neighbor in need, but it is also susceptible to the temptation of identity politics by tying a *ressentiment* driven issue (building a wall to stop immigration) to correct the perceived wrong of the (illegal) diversification of what is, in the Evangelical telling, to be God's kingdom on earth.

Again, Jeffress turns to the personal qualities of President-elect Trump, and paints him as a man who was "the only candidate who possessed the leadership skills necessary to reverse the downward trajectory of our nation."[60] However, should Trump be unable to accomplish this himself, he will need God's supernatural power: "The good news is that the same God who empowered Nehemiah nearly 2500 years ago is available to every one of us today who is willing to humble himself and ask for His help."[61] For Jeffress, and by extension Trump, whenever the leader needs any help in accomplishing the building of the wall, or reversing the moral decline of the United States, then they are reminded they can phone a friend, and God will help accomplish these goals. Which raises the question, what has God been doing among other leaders whom he has also raised up, including those who do not see eye to eye with him on immigration policy?

Jeffress concludes with a turn to Trump's famous slogan: "Make America Great Again." He says: "Psalm 33:12 gives us the starting point for making that happen: 'Blessed—great—is

[60] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

[61] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

the nation whose God is the Lord."[62] In terms of Jeffress's sermon, this serves a dual function. First, it elicits in the hearer (as does the slogan itself) a nostalgia for the time of a great American hope that, theologically speaking, was yet to be realized in the perfecting of the Christian nation. The nostalgia for a time past, a concern raised in my second chapter by Deneen, also reminds us of the inadequacy of liberalism as a whole. Thus, Jeffress is tying the hopes of the church to the hope of America. Again, this is not only poor theology, but also pushing the identity of Christians, and Christian desires, to a place they should not be. The second function is conveying a sense of marginalization for Trump supporters. In these words, the hearer is invited to see himself as an outsider who, through the correcting of perceived wrongs, will move from marginalized to empowered. Again, these wrongs are, in Jeffress's telling, both theological and political. The identity politics sermon is now complete.

Avoiding Identity Politics: Lutherans and Immigration

Above I noted the importance of the doctrine of vocation in the Lutheran two realms approach. This was especially apparent in the section examining the relationship between Lutherans and their neighbors. I suggested then, and will argue in full now, that the Lutheran teaching of vocation not only promotes engagement that does not result in identity politics, but actually leads Lutherans to a position where they are able to positively respond and advocate on behalf of neighbors whose needs might be dismissed in society and church but recognized in identity politics. In order to accomplish this, I will examine the work of Leopoldo Sánchez in two related areas. First, Sánchez shows how a controversial and potentially divisive topic such as immigration can be approached from core convictions and a Lutheran identity framework

[62] Staff, "Read the Sermon Donald Trump Heard."

leading to the possibility of different proposals for action in the polis. For instance, in the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) document *Immigrants Among Us*, for which he served as the main drafter, Sánchez notes how some Christians, and Lutherans in particular, approach immigration from the fourth commandment (obey the authorities and laws they enact), and others from the fifth one (specifically, Luther's positive definition to help and support our neighbor in every physical need).[63] Although each approach initially gives a certain priority to one command over another, both points of departure are located in and draw from core convictions (in this case, the Ten Commandments). Nevertheless, each starting point can lead to various legitimate forms of political decisions and engagement. For example, a focus on obedience to authorities may privilege policies that strengthen border security and a focus on loving the immigrant neighbor may privilege stronger policies on family unification. Sánchez provides a word of caution to Christians who often justify a one-sided political position on the basis of Scripture:

> Some Christians argue almost solely from the perspective of Christ's self-identification with strangers. What part of "love your neighbor as yourself" do you not understand? Others tend to focus only on obedience to authorities and the laws they enact. What part of "obey the authorities" do you not understand? Still others argue from the perspective of the church's call to share the Gospel with neighbors from all nations. What part of "go and make disciples" do you not understand? Without recognizing the diversity of vantage points Christians adopt to discuss what is often a highly debated topic, we are likely to talk past each other. No one theme sufficiently captures every aspect of the debate. Yet it is quite helpful to know where people are coming from, before getting them to see that there is more to consider. Learning to see the same issue from different angles should enrich our conversations.[64]

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[63] Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2012).

[64] Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Who Is My Neighbor? Immigration through Lutheran Eyes," in *Immigrant Neighbors Among Us*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R., and Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 40.

Indeed, two Christians who share the same core convictions may well disagree with each other on whether a certain policy is good or not, depending on their demographics and how they are personally affected by the policy. If both Christians approach immigration from proper core convictions, it may well be that neither of them is wrong. Identity politics, however, will push the discussion to one side or the other. For example, a church member may engage immigration or immigrants through the lens of primarily a liberal or conservative political platform without attending to the concerns of the other side. This is the temptation of identity politics that specifically befalls the church as we have explored above, and needs to be challenged. Sánchez's work helps us to deal with identity politics by inviting us to consider a broader range of issues in dealing with a controversial topic. In particular, Sánchez's article "Bearing So Much Similar Fruit" avoids the trap of identity politics by arguing that Lutheran theologians can engage a more comprehensive approach to immigration reform, considering a variety of issues such as border enforcement and family unity that account for fulfilling both commandments for the sake of various neighbors.[65]

Sánchez is also helpful in a Lutheran response to identity politics in a second way. His work suggests how a church member should be legitimately concerned about accounting for the voices of unrepresented and underrepresented communities in political life, particularly in the immigration debate. Lutheran theology has to constructively engage these neighbors and their communities in a way that their concerns are not outrightly dismissed by strict adherence to a political platform. Immigrant advocates who engage in identity politics in the style that Mark Lilla denounced in my second chapter still highlight a chance for the church to love the

[65] Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.. "Bearing So Much Similar Fruit: Lutheran Theology and Comprehensive Immigration Reform," in *On Secular Governance: Lutheran Perspectives on Contemporary Legal Issues*, ed. Ronald W. Duty and Marie A. Failinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 184–205.

immigrant neighbor. Since identity politics is typically a tool of a marginalized community, the church rightly examines whether, and to what extent, that community has been marginalized in the church and in the state. For the church, the recognition that a group has been marginalized requires action. For example, the church can advocate before the state on behalf of neighbors, in as much as her response is guided by core convictions. On this point, Sánchez notes that immigrant neighbors call the church beyond either-or propositions on the benefits (liberal) or liabilities (conservative) of immigrants to the country common in our current political climate, which tend to frame a complex issue in utilitarian and not theological terms. He explains: "In the shuffle of identity politics and tribally framed theological responses to complex social issues such as immigration law and reform, an interesting thing takes place: The refugee and immigrant neighbor, her struggles and hopes, becomes invisible."[66] To move beyond a utilitarian ethic of engagement based on a political platform, Sánchez then calls the church to demonstrate divine love for the neighbor other "by embodying ways of engaging the refugee and immigrant other through a cruciform ethic of divine love that does not only point out the bad in people but bestows the good on them."[67]

Even though there will always be different concerns and conclusions on temporal matters, it need not cause theological disunity among Christians. Sánchez notes: "The beauty of the Lutheran distinction between temporal and spiritual realms or governments is that it allows for disagreement on political issues without letting such positions get in the way of the church's unity and mission in the world."[68] Rather, the church can display creativity in taking seriously

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[66] Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Beyond Facebook Love: Luther's Two Kinds of Love and the Immigrant Other," in *Let the Gospel Lead: Essays & Sermons in Honor of Dale A. Meyer*, ed. Travis Scholl (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2020), 85.

[67] Sánchez, "Beyond Facebook Love," 86.

[68] Sánchez, "Bearing So Much Similar Fruit," 190.

multiple points of view, and restraint in speaking only where and what God has spoken, not more, not less.

The CTCR document "Immigrants Among Us" is composed of five main sections. The first examines how Scripture can inform our attitude toward immigrants. This section is helpful for forming Christian core convictions about the topic. Rather than defaulting to using the categories and concepts employed by politicians or the media, the Lutheran approach begins with a turn to Scripture. The next two sections are helpful for the Christian as he begins to consider how he structures his engagement as the document examines how both God's law and civil law impact our relationship to our neighbor, and how properly to be active in response to such both corporately, as the church, and individually in God's two realms. The fourth section is particularly helpful for us as we consider the role of vocation in forming our relationships, and thereby informing our activities on behalf of various neighbors. Finally, the document suggests some guidelines for church workers in particular to form their engagement. In order best to make use of the CTCR document, I will proceed section-by-section through the first four sections and seek to articulate how its argumentation fits within my lens, and, as the examination of proper Lutheran two realms thinking earlier in this chapter suggests, how this approach both avoids the tribal side of identity politics and provides Lutherans with a way to serve faithfully the underappreciated neighbor.

In the first section, titled "Immigrant Neighbors Past and Present," the CTCR answers the question, "how should scripture inform attitudes toward immigrants today?"[69] The text begins by acknowledging that to begin the conversation within the framework of the politicized topic of illegal immigration is problematic for theological work because it is too narrow. That concept is

[69] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 11.

not found in Scripture. What is found, however, is places where "Scripture deals with the church's basic attitude toward immigrants (aliens, sojourners, strangers) who live in the midst of God's people without qualifying its teachings on the basis of the legal or illegal status of these immigrants."[70] The first lesson for Lutherans is that Scripture sets the parameters of our engagement, even if politics or political forces provide the impetus for the engagement. The CTCR continues by examining the status of those covered by the Hebrew word *ger* which "can be translated in any number of ways: alien, foreigner, immigrant, sojourner, or stranger."[71] Even though the Old Testament nations were certainly unique kingdoms, they are not comparable to the nation-states we have today and how they deal with status questions in regard to the immigrant neighbor. Sovereign nation-states today are allowed latitude to make their own laws, including limiting immigration, but they cannot claim to do so by using the Old Testament as a blueprint. Admittedly, from Old Testament Israel, where God governed both the spiritual and temporal affairs, we can certainly learn much about the differences between Israel and the *ger*. The document notes: "While the representative text from Leviticus 19:33–34 and other similar texts show God's consistent call to Israel to love and care for the strangers in their midst, other texts can be read as showing that not all foreigners have the same status as Israelites."[72] Thus, the relationship is complex, and must be understood in whole, not in part, and applied appropriately, not twisted to a particular end.

> Just as there is a danger in using the Old Testament data anachronistically to argue for love of the stranger without concern for civil law today, there is also a danger of using distinctions between Israel and sojourners in the Old Testament to defend similar distinctions in immigration law and enforcement of borders today."[73]

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[70] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 11.

[71] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 12.

[72] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 13.

[73] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 14.

In order to refrain from suggesting that there is only one biblical way of considering immigration today, the CTCR next moves on to talk about the New Testament era where the title "Israel" is no longer about a particular nation or state, but rather refers to the church. This distinction allows the Christian to articulate the difference between spiritual rights and benefits that are shared among all believers in Christ, and the temporal rights and benefits that are not always shared by residents of different communities.

> On the one hand, as spiritual Israel, Christian immigrants participate in all the spiritual blessings of God's people through faith in Christ. At the same time, one can admit that under the temporal state and its laws these same brothers and sisters do not share with Christian citizens of the state the same temporal rights and privileges under the civil law in every case.[74]

So Christians are given a few ways to consider thinking of the immigrant, and thereby approaching political challenges related to immigration. As they consider the immigrant and immigration, the Christian does so while balancing the legitimacy of the state to make laws, and the needs of all neighbors (including immigrants). In the entirety, the Christian must also balance the spiritual implications of the biblical texts against the temporal implications, and be certain not to confuse the two in either direction. In concluding the view of the Old Testament, immigrants may be "seen as neighbors who, for the most part, are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society."[75]

Next, the CTCR document looks at some of the New Testament implications of loving the neighbor and, more importantly for this matter, the stranger with whom Jesus self-identified: "Our Lord's compassion for the stranger, for those outside the house of Israel, which is evident in His ministry, is consistent with Yahweh's concern for the strangers around and among the

[74] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 14.

[75] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 16.

people of Israel."[76] In addition to Jesus's own actions, St. Paul frequently commends and exhorts various congregations to account for their relationship to their neighbors in need, including the stranger and foreigner: "These apostolic exhortations to the Christian churches to show hospitality to all strangers mirror and are consistent with Yahweh's own command to Israel to reflect his love for strangers."[77] The document continues:

> To sum up, we must acknowledge that, while the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures give ample evidence of Yahweh's will for His people to love the strangers and aliens by attending to their bodily and spiritual needs, the Scriptures do not speak directly to questions about how the church today should think about or deal with contemporary immigration law in general or "illegal immigration" in particular. Scripture teaching on immigrants, therefore, cannot be directly translated into current immigration laws or policies.[78]

The Bible does not command us to build a wall, or not to; neither should a Christian pastor preach a sermon that suggests either as God's imperative. However, the Christian, formed by Scripture and the Ten Commandments, specifically the fifth, are ready to "help and support" their neighbor in every physical need.

The fourth commandment is also necessary and relevant to the conversation, and the CTCR turns to that discussion in the next section. It opens by noting that "[w]hile the Scriptures consistently teach the church to love the strangers in her midst as a foundational value for all times and places, the Scriptures also instruct Christians to obey or submit to the authorities whom God has sent, instituted, and appointed for our good."[79] Thus, Lutherans understand that there are multiple imperatives at work in the core convictions, and discerning when and how to act on behalf of each becomes key to faithful living. That faithful living, however, is not always

[76] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 16.

[77] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 18.

[78] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 18.

[79] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 21.

agreed on when it comes to the outer rings that Benne articulated above.

> While Martin Luther includes the promotion of our neighbor's life (including that of the stranger) under the fifth commandment ("You are not to kill"), he also clearly teaches submission to the authorities God has placed in our midst (including, civil servants) under the fourth commandment ("You are to honor your father and your mother"). Both are the will of God and, therefore, must be carried out. This means concretely that we must love immigrants, show fairness to them, and promote their lives and well-being regardless of their legal status in society and, at the same time, submit to the temporal authorities and thus obey the civil laws they enact, promote, and enforce in society (including those laws that deal with immigrants and their legal status). Given these equally valid demands that God's commandments place on Christians, it is not uncommon for brothers and sisters in Christ to struggle with and argue among themselves about the best ways to be faithful to what God desires of his people.[80]

The Lutheran two realms focus thus helps us form our core convictions through the words of Scripture. In the process a complex and multifaceted understanding emerges, including the duality of the imperative God places on us in certain situations. Frequently there are multiple correct Christian concerns at work, and the question becomes one of priority. On the Christian Right, the prevailing priority is frequently the nationalist concept of sovereign borders, and the immigrant in the process is neglected, or turned into an enemy for political reasons. On the Left, both Christian and secular, the prevailing priority is frequently the immigrant, and questions regarding the state become minimized. In the Lutheran model, there is room for both the immigrant and the state to be tended to, and indeed there is an imperative that both be taken seriously and not neglected. Thus, in this example, it is clear that Lutherans should not engage in turns to identity politics that would strip away either the neighbor or the state, but rather should seek to advocate for both rightly.

Further, the turn to identity politics, as we have seen, tends to become totalizing and polarizing as everything becomes political and politicized. In the process, Christians are tempted

[80] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 21.

to engage in the worst political thoughts and behaviors concerning other Christians, including their assumptions concerning the validity (or lack thereof) of their faith. The CTCR calls us to view things properly, and give our neighbors (all of them) the benefit of the doubt.

> Acknowledgment of genuine and legitimate Christian disagreements about the application of God's commands to reflection on and attitudes toward aliens also serves as a deterrent against caricatures of each other's positions on a delicate issue. On the one hand, Christians who tend to give priority to obedience to the civil authorities (fourth commandment) in their approach to immigration are not necessarily insensitive to the plight of immigrants and their families. On the other hand, Christians who tend to give higher priority to the well-being and fair treatment of immigrants and their families (fifth commandment) in their approach to immigration are not necessarily insensitive to the need for obedience to civil authorities and the laws of the land.[81]

A properly balanced Lutheran understanding allows for Christian engagement from any number of starting points, each with a particular time, place, and application from Scripture.

The third section of the CTCR document highlights the fact that such engagement is framed and regulated by the theology of the two realms, which in part "reminds us that the unity of the church is grounded in and nourished by the Gospel and the sacraments."[82] Our unity is found in the essentials of the church, not a proven faith by action deemed appropriate by either the Right or the Left. Additionally, "Christians can acknowledge that at times particular civil legislation may not be in agreement with the law of God in some respect,"[83] which impacts the way that they choose to follow it or not due to matters of conscience. When the Christian is faced with such a situation, he must follow God rather than man (Acts 5:29), and thus engage in civil disobedience.

In the immigration issue the challenge of public law running contrary to the law of God

[81] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 22–23.

[82] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 32.

[83] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 32.

results in Christian debate. As indicated, for some the law of conscience is drawn closer to the fourth commandment, for others it is closer to the fifth. The responses will be varied, even among faithful Christians, but this is not a call for disunity as the politically inclined are wont to do. Rather, the

> Lutheran distinction between the two realms reminds us that disagreements about immigration law among Christians should not infringe upon their unity in Christ, which the means of grace alone bring about and preserve. We can then once again freely acknowledge that, among Lutherans who sincerely want to show mercy to their immigrant neighbors and also obey the civil authority, there can be a reasonable spectrum of opinions and a variety of debate positions concerning what is—and what is not—just, good, reasonable, orderly, and peace building for society in current immigration law. Christians should exercise civility when dealing with one another in matters that pertain to the state of the civil law lest their speech becomes a cause for division and strife within the church.[84]

Where identity politics leads to the struggles of no shared vision and the politicization of everything, the Lutheran approaches the issue in such a manner to neither exclude the other side, nor immediately turn to a political program to "solve" the "issue." Rather, the Lutheran is equipped to argue for both sides appropriately. That is, the Lutheran's primary identity is not a political identity, but a creaturely identity formed by the word and sacraments to give witness to the Creator, and to serve his neighbors in all positions.

The next section of the CTCR turns to the doctrine of vocation, and in this section we begin to see the implication of Lutheran doctrine for the relationship to the neighbor. The document locates vocation in God's created order and command: "To have a vocation is no accident, but God's created intent for us. Vocations can be appropriately understood as part of the fabric or order of God's own creation. Vocations derive in one way or another from God's command and institution of work as part of His creation."[85] Thus vocation is the foundation of our relationships

[84] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 33.

[85] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us,* 37

with one another. Having been made righteous before God (*coram deo*), the Christian is freed to live rightly before fellow creatures of the world (*coram mundo*). Being a creature of God imprints us with vocations and neighbors who need our care: "Indeed, my neighbor is anyone who needs my help."[86] The doctrine of vocation removes the theoretical and vague nature of the law from those who are not affected by it, and replaces it with human faces who are indeed impacted by the laws. Thus: "Immigration is not merely an issue about law in some general sense, but about the individuals who are our neighbors."[87] For the Christian, this has implications beyond just political engagement:

> Just as the Lutheran teaching on vocation avoids the idea that the law can be fulfilled abstractly without some concrete neighbor in mind, this teaching also helps us to avoid the danger of thinking of our neighbor as an abstract object by directing us to advocate for specific neighbors in their particular situations and within a context of actual service, from some concrete office or station in life.[88]

Thus Lutherans understand their responsibilities to neighbors not in a hypothetical way, but in a real way. At the same time, a vocational focus should not deter us from recognizing those neighbors with whom we do not interact with in person, but live and serve all around us. Vocation extends beyond the immediate and is never "permission to deny that the person who is farther removed is also my neighbor."[89] As a Lutheran strives to avoid the *ressentiment* feelings which motivate the Christian Right and Christian Left, and which appear in identity politics driven issues such as immigration, her eyes are rightly directed beyond herself and her desires and to those who need her advocacy.

At the same time, the Christian recognizes that, by nature, her advocacy for one neighbor

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[86] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 39.

[87] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 39.

[88] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 39; see also Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "The Human Face of Justice: Reclaiming the Neighbor in Law, Vocation, and Justice Talk," *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (2013): 117–32.

[89] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 40.

may mean not advocating for another in some cases. That is, a "measure of conflict is inevitable in a sinful world with so many competing issues calling for our attention and so many types of neighbors calling for our help."[90] For Lutherans who function in some form of office, be it family, school, church, or government, this paradox is especially difficult to navigate.

> Think, for example, of a border patrol agent. As an individual Christian, he might actually disagree with current immigration law and see the current system as unjust, noting how it does not seem to take into consideration the economic needs and the labor demands that bring those who are poorest into the United States. As an individual Christian, the agent may also show compassion to the immigrant who is coming illegally into the United States, taking care of his basic humanitarian needs and at times even providing him protection from "coyotes" smugglers) and others who might want to harm him. As an individual Christian, acting outside his particular office, he may also share the Gospel with immigrants—whether here legally or illegally—in his neighborhood and serve their needs through the congregation's mercy programs in the community. And yet, in his vocation as a border patrol agent in the civil realm, he is bound to stop even the neediest neighbor who wants a better life for his children from crossing the border into the United States.[91]

So even in the midst of a paradox, the Lutheran is prepared properly to love his neighbor, whomever and however that takes place, and honor the state.

Indeed, it is possible for the Christian to become inappropriately aligned on either side of the issues, and one must guard against allowing this to happen. Leopoldo Sánchez demonstrates how confusion of the two realms can lead to this misalignment, and the issues that may come from that. The first form of confusion occurs when a person places obedience to the government over the ability of the church to do mercy work. In this type of confusion, the person's zeal for the rule of law (often based on political identity) becomes a stumbling block to the Gospel as it is embodied in the church's acts of love. This may happen, for example, if a border patrol agent insisted his church check documentation status before helping people in a mercy program in the

[90] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 41.

[91] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 42–43.

community.

The second example of confusion is the inverse, that is, the zeal to proclaim the Gospel over the enforcement of laws. In this type of confusion, the evangelical zeal (often based again on political identity) becomes detrimental to the Christian's proper functioning within the state. Consider again a border patrol agent tasked with stopping neighbors from illegally crossing the border, but rather than stopping them, he instead drives them to his church where he knows they can have needs met because he disagrees with current immigration law. To place one concern over the other, hospitality over legality, mission to the nations over obedience to authority, to the detriment of the other, is to work against God's right ordering of life in both realms. Indeed, such confusion can even be harmful to the privileged realm. In placing the church above the state, one may cause disunity between Christians, thus dividing the church. Again, the hypothetical border patrol agent gives us a clear example. If his disapproval of the immigration law that he is sworn to uphold leads him to harboring undocumented migrants, he not only makes the state less trustworthy, but as a member of a church his disregard of the law will put him in a compromised place with his neighbors in the church who count on him to uphold the law.

Whether they agree or disagree on the appropriateness of the law, good order demands that people do what they are charged with in their respective offices. Of course, when the charges of the office are in conflict with God's will, Christians must defer to the Lord who reigns over all states. Similarly, if the agent places the state above the church, such as intentionally rounding up people who do not have citizenship at a church's mercy program, one may make a fellow Christian (immigrant or not) more pessimistic about the state, and even mistrust the church's broader evangelistic efforts in the community.[92]

[92] See Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Misión e inmigración. Pedagogía para trabajar entre los inmigrantes,"

Thus, the Christian goals for the state are to advocate for laws which reflect God's will (thus providing good order), including his laws on behalf of the neighbor. For Lutherans, discussion of the civil laws are important, but the goals are modest in that they strive for proximate justice for the neighbor in the temporal realm. In doing so, they may disagree on how best to take care of immigrant neighbors, but the command to do so remains.

> And yet in all their discussions on civil law, Christians are called to consider not only their particular vocations and specific neighbors, but also God's clear and timeless will and command in Scripture to remember, care for, and deal fairly with the immigrant neighbors in their midst. Christians will, of course, disagree on *how* to deal with all the aforementioned concerns and demands, but *that* they should do so is not negotiable."[93]

To review, in the issue of immigration we see in the CTCR document a Lutheran approach informed by two realms thinking and the teaching of vocation. In this example, we are able to see the effect of Lutheran core convictions: rooted in the salvific work of Jesus, one is able to discern how best to love neighbor according to both the fourth or fifth commandments as applicable. As a starting point, Lutherans may disagree about which commandment receives priority. Yet both commands ultimately play a significant role in engagement on behalf of neighbors. The Lutheran's identity as a creature of God allows him to see his relationship to his neighbor as a fellow creature, worthy of the same respect and providence from God, and with similar cares and concerns. In the process, one will seek to serve and care for that neighbor as one is vocationally able to do, be it personally, within his office, or by advocation through her voting or supporting legislation she believes will best help the neighbor. Finally, the Lutheran's goal for the state will be to advocate for both helpful immigration policies and a functioning state. Above all, the Lutheran will strive for legislation which will lead the state to act fairly on

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Missio Apostolica 16, no. 1 (2008): 70–74.

[93] CTCR, *Immigrants Among Us*, 44.

behalf of all, but more importantly he will love his neighbor and share the Gospel with him.

To this point, we have seen how the Lutheran model can, when properly understood, frame political engagement in a way that properly places identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state under core convictions. Additionally, we have seen that the core convictions of the Lutheran model are capable of promoting engagement that encompasses the legitimate theological concerns of other Christians across the political spectrum, and remains faithful to the work that God seeks to accomplish on this earth through his two realms. Additionally, we are able to understand that the Lutheran model promotes a positive engagement with the state, and not an engagement based off of a perceived grievance or other *ressentiment* based concepts. Thus, the Lutheran model is capable of positive Christian engagement with the state.

For Lutherans, it is imperative that such engagement be kept free of the elements of identity politics which, whether based on secular or Christian identities, can produce negative engagement, suspicion of the state, and strained relationships between the church and her neighbors. These challenges, as discussed in the second chapter, are harmful across the board, and the Lutheran understanding of the reign of God through the co-institutions of church and state demand better. Indeed, there is arguably not a model of church-state engagement that is more interested in a properly functioning state, and church, than the Lutheran model. However, this should not be understood as license from the state to do as it pleases, but rather demands that the state seek to fulfil its God-given responsibilities on behalf of its citizens. That is, the state is to be exhorted according to God's law. The church must, therefore, rigorously guard against engaging in identity politics, which in its expressions in America today holds unsatisfactory views of the state.

Guarding against identity politics allows the church to recognize the needs of neighbors

who engage in identity politics. This engagement frequently results in criticism and the dismissal of the needs of the neighbor by those who are not ideologically inclined to agree with various groups working from an identity politics framework. For the Lutheran, such outright dismissal is unacceptable. Bemoaning the existence of identity politics, or belittling the neighbor who is marginalized by the state, is sinful. Thus, the appropriate Lutheran response is to be prepared always to give a faithful witness, according to the core convictions, to the neighbor, a fellow creature, and to the state, on behalf of the neighbor's legitimate needs. In order to accomplish these purposes, the Lutheran remains faithfully engaged with people espousing identity politics, listening to their legitimate concerns, by means of the two realms and vocation frameworks.

This exploration would not be complete without examining whether the Lutheran model is able to avoid the trappings of identity politics. For instance, Lutherans have a shared vision for the functioning of the state, but is that vision realistic? In terms of the politicization of everything, is the Lutheran approach able to, on the one hand avoid the politicization of everything, and, on the other hand, appropriately discern places where political activity is necessary? Rather than attaching herself to the various slogans of the Right or Left, and thus truncating her relationship to neighbor or state, does the teaching of vocation lead Lutherans to avoid the mistreatment of the marginalized neighbors commonly defended in identity politics? Finally, in seeking the right functioning of the state, how does the Lutheran model advocate for such functioning? A comparison of the other models of political engagement and church-state engagement discussed in previous chapters with the Lutheran model will help answer those questions.

A Comparison by Means of my Fourfold Lens

Recapping the Other Models

In chapter two I argued that my fourfold lens serves as a beneficial tool for analyzing political engagement in America, particularly in response to the challenge of identity politics. The lens asks what core convictions, identity, relationship to neighbors, and goals of the state guide political engagement. I have argued that the core convictions contribute significantly to the formation of identity, view of the neighbor, and goals for the state. In a sense, identity politics can be understood as the replacement of core convictions with individual (or group) identity, thus leading to engagement on behalf of the self (or preferred group), and destroying or ignoring the relationship to certain neighbors, except for the occasional marriages of convenience. This replacement comes when a group feels as if its identity has been dismissed, ignored, or victimized in some way by those in power, and turns in *ressentiment* to an engagement that demands its recognition and appropriate action on its behalf.

My fourfold lens also allows us to begin to see how variously held core convictions affect political engagement in general, and thus understand the potential turn to identity politics. For instance, I traced the argument of Patrick Deneen to demonstrate the effect of having no shared core convictions. In his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, he argues that the core convictions of America in particular, and Western liberalism in general, have so collapsed that the entire philosophical program of liberalism is incapable of providing the necessary structure for a society. Further, he argues that the redefinitions of liberty and its associated concepts have produced a self-centered, identity-driven, political engagement. No longer can we assume that questions such as, "what does the Constitution say," or more importantly, "what does God say," drive political engagement; rather, group or individual liberty has become the highest authority in American political life. Since shared core convictions are capable of providing a binding

structure (that is, framing a common understanding for all people) the result of removing binding structures of society, such as religion, culture, and even some shared view of government, is that Americans find themselves increasingly at odds with neighbors with whom they disagree, and incapable of understanding what their duty should be toward them. When citizens no longer share in the hard and shared work of citizenship, do not have many shared elements of culture, and do not recognize the same or similar goals for government, the possibility of self-government—a key premise of liberalism—in a world of identity politics disappears or at least is severely weakened. As Deneen notes, this is a problem for both liberal and conservative politicians, but it is also a problem for Christian engagement.

In chapter three, I focused on various groups within Christianity in an attempt to understand their core convictions, and the resulting identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state. In the two primary models, namely, the Christian Right and the Christian Left, easily discernable narratives helped to frame their engagement, and both narratives ultimately proved to be susceptible to the temptations of identity politics. For instance, on the Christian Right the so-called Cosmic and American Narratives, identified by James Gilmore, demonstrate an engagement focused on shared victimage, the loss of religious liberties, and an eschatological anticipation for America. In effect, these narratives serve to create a totalized and binary worldview wherein faith is demonstrated through particular action, particularly voting, and advocating, ultimately, on behalf of the Republican Party. The result is a truncated version of Christianity, and a politicized understanding of God's eternal truths as there is no room for discernment and reflection, and things which are adiaphora become theological imperatives. In the end, a pastor may end up preaching at a worship service prior to a president's inauguration, advocating for particular policies while politicizing the concerns of the neighbor in need, and

worst of all, completely failing to mention the central event of Christianity, that is, the person and work of Christ Jesus. Thus, on the Christian Right, identity politics considers its engagement less in terms of belonging to God and more as defined by belonging to the Republican Party. When this happens, the relationship to the neighbor is, in the case of immigration for instance, unnecessarily strained, and the goals for the state are defined by a political group, not God.

For the Christian Left, a similar turn becomes possible when one examines their core convictions. As Hunter explained, their convictions are formed primarily by hostility to the Christian Right who, in the eyes of the Left, fails to represent Christianity appropriately. Again, there is, in this expression, a focus on voting and approved advocacy to prove faith, and any dissension is seen as grounds for the questioning of faith. Further, their commitment is framed by a commitment to liberalism and the promise of social justice that comes from proper engagement. In the end, much as the Christian Right is virtually indistinguishable from the Republican Party, the Christian Left becomes virtually indistinguishable from the Democratic Party. In turn, their identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals are also a compromised and truncated from of Christianity.

Similarly, using my fourfold lens, we were able to recognize the inability of the "purity from" model and Hunter's own "faithful presence" to account fully for the concerns raised by identity politics. These two models are similar in that they both recognize the trappings of the Constantinian engagement that the "defensive against" and "relevance to" models embrace. However, we were also able to see how these approaches are themselves susceptible to the trappings of identity politics. In the "purity from" model, the state is viewed antagonistically. Tainted as the state is with violence, the church is thus prone to underutilize or reject the power of the state. But in doing so, marginalized neighbors may fail to receive the good things they

deserve from the state. In Hunter's "faithful presence," the state is viewed somewhat more positively, yet the temptation to fall into quietism and indifference remains as a potential risk.

While it is fair to argue that in a democratic society such as ours it is impossible to have a completely shared vision, the concerns raised by Lilla and Hunter go beyond some idealistic world in which all people think the same about all policies, and raise for us the bigger concerns about whether there can even be shared framing structures for our engagement. One such concern is worldview, as we see in the engagement between fundamentalists and secularists.[94] In a sense, the two groups will never be speaking the same language when it comes to framing morality, unless one side gives up a portion of its framework. Even if the argument is not about having agreement in all points, but rather simply agreement in essentials, the Christian will still find herself at odds with groups outside the church such as secularists, as political doctrines such as the separation of church and state are used in a way to silence the foundation of the Christian witness. Thus, it is essential that Christians understand their contribution not in terms of full political agreement on Christian doctrine (this is not even possible in the church, let alone in the state), but rather on humbly offering a compelling narrative which accounts for the story of everything, is capable of advocating for a just society, and takes seriously the neighbor and his needs. In this way, the Christian is able to avoid simply advocating for his position for his own sake, but rather advocates for the created realm as a whole, according to the proper understanding he has received from his core convictions. Thus, the problem for the various models discussed in chapter three is not that they fail to offer a shared vision per se, but rather that their engagement, being predicated on *ressentiment*, is often promoted in a partialized and

[94] See, for example, Hart's section tracing the challenges surrounding evolution and other social issues in chapter 3 of *Lost Soul*.

self-serving manner. Thus, although the Christian does offer an all-encompassing vision for the world, the politicization of the church, and the turn to identity politics by many of the vocal representatives of Christian engagement, fails to overcome the fragmented society.

Christians speak authoritatively where the Bible speaks, and never otherwise, at least not as Christians. It is possible to report authoritatively on the score of a football game if one has firsthand knowledge of the results, or perhaps to speak authoritatively in a field in which one is trained, but one hardly has to be a Christian to do so in either case. A similar rule may be applied to the second trap of identity politics, namely the politicization of everything, and it is a good rule for Christians to live by: one should speak as a Christian only where God's will is clear, and one should clearly distinguish where he is speaking from a different perspective. There are concrete differences between speaking against, for example, abortion or homosexual marriage and the tax code. As passionately as a Christian may feel that a more conservative or liberal tax code is able to produce results closer in line with God's definition of justice, there is no clear biblical imperative to favor either. In fact, arguments on both sides may be found in or guided by scriptural logic. However, the Bible is clear when it speaks to human life (fifth commandment) and sexuality (sixth commandment) and it is necessary that God's people faithfully advocate for his law in their dealings with the state. The need to discern between issues to which we speak *as a Christian*, and issues to which we speak only as an American is huge.

Further, it may be necessary for a Christian to either refrain from speaking to some topics outside of the Christian core convictions, especially when he has no expertise on the issues at hand. In this way, the Christian will not only maintain that distinction, but may actually gain a greater voice on things of higher importance: the things God actually addresses. Faithful Christian engagement thus necessitates discernment when speaking, but the models of

engagement by the above groups fail to provide room for that discernment. This is especially true of the Christian Right and Left models ("defensive against"/fundamentalists and "relevance to"/liberals) due to their close association with political parties; but it is also true for the "purity from" group and Hunter's own "faithful presence" models which may fail to allow proper things to be political by focusing on, in the former, intentional disengagement, and, in the latter, by subscribing to a pessimistic or fatalistic view of the state. Thus, the cares and concerns of a neighbor may be ignored, and good things which may be done for the neighbor may not be accomplished.

In the process these aspects of engagement lead to a straining of the relationship with the neighbor. On the Christian Right, the neighbor other (specifically marginalized neighbors such as immigrants) and their advocates are not always treated as fellow creatures, but viewed as political opponents or adversaries. On the Christian Left, marginalized neighbors are often more quickly recognized, and advocacy on their behalf is taken to the state; however, that advocacy can become actual or tacit commitment to political positions incompatible with a Christian worldview, such as in the case of abortion, especially when the desired praxis never occurs. Further, these actions are often portrayed as "doing the gospel," and in the process of pursuing these temporal goods the actual gospel is obscured or lost. When Christians fail properly to clearly speak both law and gospel, they ultimately weaken both and do, potentially, eternal harm to the neighbor.

Thus, when the church fails to be the church and fulfill the duties God has established for it, the state is also harmed, be it from a failure to provide for those who are in need of his care, failure to uphold his law which in turn leads to a lower standard for his creatures, or a failure for the state to receive the necessary support and cooperation of the church. Thus, the church and the

state must remain both distinct and cooperative. To do any different is to fail to bear witness to what God desires. Identity politics in America, when engaged in by the church, fails to accomplish bear witness to the fullness of God's revelation, and ultimately more harm than good is often done to those whose needs lead them to resort to identity politics.

The Lutheran Difference

In his 2019 article "The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything," Joel Okamoto seeks to communicate clearly the Christian story of everything, according to the narrative set forth by the Bible. He takes the Bible at its own words, and sketches a story that tells itself through stories, by "Scripture interpreting Scripture."[95] In the process, he traces the Bible's story from creation and fall to God's work in building his people and their rebellion, to the sending of Jesus, his acceptance and rejection, and finally to his ascension and eventual return to "finish what he started."[96] Okamoto admits that there can be variety in the telling of the story, but certain components are necessary in order for it to be God's story.

> This is a rendering of the biblical story of everything. It could be told in different ways, just as the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been told in different ways. But it would be [sic] still be the same God, the same Jesus, the same ministry, the same death, the same resurrection, the same return. It could be told with different kinds of themes, and this is only one version of the story, but it is a version of a single story. It is a story about God and creation. Human creatures have a special place in the story, and the story is addressed to human creatures. But the story is about God and all that he has made, and all that he will make new in and through Jesus Christ.[97]

Within this story, Christians find themselves, and, indeed, all creatures.

Okamoto provides four reasons for recognizing the legitimacy of this story, namely, the

[95] Joel P. Okamoto, "The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything," *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 3 (2019): 55.

[96] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 60.

[97] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 60–61.

fact that this story tells the story like the Bible does, is congruent with the Creeds of the church, makes sense of Christian life, and makes sense of Christian doctrine.[98] His third justification, that of making sense of the Christian life, demonstrates how the Lutheran orients all aspects of his life, including his political activity, in light of God's overarching narrative, thus calling Lutherans to operate within their unique narrative which is able to form Christians, and account for fellow creatures, according to church practices.

Beyond providing for ways to make "sense of the church practices like evangelism, baptism, and catechesis,"[99] important as they are,

> [t]his rendering of the story also makes sense of the lives of individual Christians, because the story itself leads Christians to their identity and their life. The Catechisms of the Creed already do this. From the beginning of the story, God being the Creator means that Christians understand themselves as creatures and live as creatures. "God has made me and all creatures…. He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them…. He defends me against all danger…. For which it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him." From this, too, the ideas of station and vocation also make sense. Jesus Christ being Lord and coming to bring the Kingdom of God means that the Christians also understand themselves as "His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."[100]

Thus, the Lutheran understanding of "the story of everything" makes sense of the Christian life by demonstrating the co-creatureliness of all people, and the blessings both temporal and spiritual available to all from God. Lutheran political engagement accounts for all people, whether those outside the church recognize it or not. In the process, the Lutheran is able to recognize the needs of each of his neighbors in the state and properly discern them in light of God's will. Then he is also prepared to advocate on behalf of a particular neighbor whose needs are not being met by the state, rather than engaging in any kind of *ressentiment*-induced

[98] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 61–63.

[99] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 61.

[100] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 61–62.

engagement looking for correctives on behalf of the church. Lutheran motivation, including political motivation, is focused on securing and delivering these blessings to our fellow man, not on getting them for ourselves.

The role of vocation in the Christian's life takes center stage in Okamoto's rendering above, and he emphasizes that it only makes sense within the more complete narrative of the story of everything. Church practices are made sense of in the Christian story, and so are things outside of the church proper, including our political engagement. So the right way for a Christian to begin thinking about his engagement in the world is not in terms of a political party or policy issue, but rather in terms of "my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey" God. Our task is to determine how we rightly (in God's determination) care for our neighbors in each moment based on this rendering, and our life "under Him in His kingdom [in which we] serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." In light of this focus, there is no sense of *ressentiment* permitted in Lutheran engagement. Instead, Lutherans feel a sense of privilege in participation—not because the state permits it through democracy, but because the Creator of everything has so structured our existence that we get to be his witnesses in all our activities.

Christian doctrine plays a key role in directing this motivation in living the Christian life, and that doctrine makes sense only within an appropriately rendered telling of the Christian story: "The story accounts not only for the content of doctrine. The story often helps to explain the topic or the problem that the doctrine addresses."[101] This understanding is especially helpful when one tries to consider the variety of Christian concerns raised by political engagement, and allows the Christian to do so in a way that does not lead to identity politics, but rather contains the totality of the Christian doctrine within its core convictions. This helps Christians determine

[101] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 62

not only what to advocate for, but to consider why they advocate the way they do, as such a "rendering of the story gives rise to the kinds of questions out of which comes our body of doctrine."[102] Further, because Lutheran political engagement is grounded within the truths of our body of doctrine, it includes room for a variety of political views dependent on the vocational circumstances one finds himself in, as long as they align with the core convictions of the church. Thus, Lutheran engagement is of the kind that all Christians should be able to subscribe to, assuming they have the same core convictions. Those who, for instance, believe the Bible to be less than God's Word would have different core convictions.

Although the world may politicize every operation of the state, or try to politicize the church and her response to the state, the Lutheran will not engage in the discussion from an identity politics perspective, but will rather ask the question of what God desires, and act accordingly. Nowhere in the conversation should a Lutheran ask, "how do I redress my grievances with the state?" Rather the Lutheran goes on being a faithful Lutheran in the context of his vocations, and when the will of God conflicts with the will of the world, he will act in accordance with his theological identity. Thus the Lutheran teaching of vocation provides a framework for proper and faithful engagement without the need to resort to identity politics. The Lutheran model of engagement, particularly stemming from its core convictions framed by the two realms teaching and the doctrine of vocation, provide the church at large with a possibility for faithful political engagement.

The four traps of identity politics can be avoided when political action is properly understood on God's terms, that is, in the story God provides us in the Bible. In the Lutheran model, with core convictions centered on Christ and expanding out through God's revelation in

[102] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 63.

Scripture, and the history of Christian reflection, one has a model formed by the Bible, which places all people as equal creatures under the same Creator. The two realms teaching helps the Lutheran understand his identity as it relates to the state, and therefore also the goals he has for the state, and further to properly regard the state as part of God's left-hand realm. Since the state is an institution of God, it is to be honored, as is the church. The Lutheran seeks to do both, and recognizes that both church and state are equally valid and necessary under God, equally to be obeyed, and equally called to perform their intended functions in God's creation. Lutheran engagement recognizes the reality that such engagement is freed from attempting to create a "Christian" state, it already belongs to God. Thus, a Lutheran model of engagement helps one avoid the negative aspects of identity politics.

Additionally, two particular aspects of the Lutheran approach provide hope for overcoming the challenges of identity politics: first, the Lutheran model encompasses all people, and indeed all things; and, second, the Lutheran model is able to address the concerns of all Christians who share the common core convictions. Okamoto's observations help us to understand how the Lutheran view of reality is rightly able to account for all people, and thus promote community within our communities, via a vision for and available to all people. While it is impossible to impose a vision on others, a vision that is able to account for all people is a starting point to a vision that invites others into the story. While we never anticipate that the world will see things through a Lutheran lens, we nonetheless are constantly inviting the world into God's story of everything. The reading of Scripture as God's story of everything allows Lutheran engagement to account for all people of all places and times, and thus gives Christians a cross-cultural means and lens by which to consider faithful engagement regardless of when and where they find themselves living. Such an account is cross-cultural as all creatures of God relate to each other

through their various vocations. The same unchanging account (or Story of Everything) is enduringly cross-cultural because it unites all creatures of all times and all places under the same God and his ruling of creation. Thus, the Lutheran account and associated engagement are not based on an anthropocentric rendering of history such as the triumph of liberalism, a manifest destiny, or the ushering in of the eschaton by political means, but rather on the Christian rendering of everything from creation to new creation. By cutting through the man-made barriers of our present politicized reality—such as the binary nature of our present political engagement, or the uncritical embracing of liberalism and Constantinianism which clouds the uniqueness of the church in the world—Lutheran engagement reaches out to all neighbors regardless of their identities. In this way, Lutheran theology offers a narrative that takes each person, differences included, seriously.

For Christians who share core convictions, the result of a Lutheran approach to political engagement is that they are not easily lured by identity politics, while remaining sensitive to their concern for marginalized neighbors. This is the possibility suggested by the work of Leopoldo Sánchez on immigrants and immigration issues. Complex political challenges receive serious consideration. The church provides a faithful witness which is both timeless and timely. The neighbor has his needs met, and the church and state function according to the unique purposes God has prescribed for them. Of course, the Lutheran is not deceived. This will not produce a utopia or a world that perfectly functions according to God's law. For that, we await the eschaton, when all things are made fully right in Christ. Sánchez observes:

> Our diversity of Lutheran themes or narrative frameworks highlights not only that immigration is a complex reality that can be approached form several angles, but that Lutheran theology itself—due in part to its rich paradoxical character—can deal with such complexity theologically in a way that does not seek to resolve all tensions. Lutheran theology is willing to live with a certain measure of freedom and ambiguity in the realm of ethics, while also attempting to address issues practically for the sake

> of some neighbor in God's world as seen from the calling or vocation God has given each one to work with in this life. Without some neighbor in mind, calls to see Christ in the vulnerable stranger, debates about just law in God's temporal kingdom, missiological agendas about bringing Christ to the nations, and appeals to live out one's vocations in the world, mean little to nothing. Whatever starting point one uses in approaching immigration issues today, a Lutheran ethic will ultimately force us to put a human face on the debate and lead us to ask, "Who is my neighbor?"[103]

Replacing immigration in the above quote with any other political topic of the day reinforces the same point: for Lutheran engagement to accomplish its ends, it must do so on behalf of a specific neighbor. When properly understood and implemented, the Lutheran approach outlined above is commended for Christians seeking engagement without falling into the traps of identity politics, while seeking to care for the neighbor who has been marginalized, whose voice needs to be heard for the sake of minimizing the turn to *ressentiment*, the righting of wrongs, the proper placement of political concerns, and finally the contribution to the right functioning of God's creation.

[103] Sánchez, "Who is My Neighbor," 42.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the intersection of church and identity politics, and argued for a constructive approach to political identity and engagement grounded in the Lutheran tradition. In order to accomplish this, I first defined what identity politics is, and how it has come to function in the United States. Mark Lilla, a committed liberal in both senses of the term, deplores identity politics as being a model of political engagement that ultimately gave rise to the presidency of Donald Trump. For him, the American left abdicated their role of offering a cohesive narrative at the end of what he calls the Roosevelt Dispensation, and they did so by, in his view, becoming like the American right.

> The great liberal abdication began during the Reagan years. With the end of the Roosevelt Dispensation and the rise of a unified and ambitious right, American liberals faced a serious challenge: to develop a fresh political vision of the country's shared destiny, adapted to the new realities of American society and chastened by the failures of old approaches. Liberals failed to do this. Instead they threw themselves into the movement politics of identity, losing a sense of what we share as citizens and what binds us as a nation. An image for Roosevelt liberalism and the unions that supported it was that of two hands shaking. A recurring image of identity liberalism is that of a prism refracting a single beam of light into its constituent colors, producing a rainbow. This says it all.[1]

In the process, the individualism promoted by the right was embraced by the left, albeit with different end goals.

The end results of this turn to identity politics are seen in the critiques offered by Lilla and James Davison Hunter, and tracing their arguments we recognize four problems in particular: the lack of a shared vision, the politicization of everything, the mistreatment of (especially marginalized) neighbors, and the improper functioning of the state. For the church, these

[1] Lilla, *Once and Future*, 8–9.

concerns are legitimate concerns as well, and for Lutheran theology in particular, the last two concerns offer constructive onramps to considering proper and faithful political engagement.

I argued, along with Patrick Deneen, that the turn to identity politics and its concerns are less of a surprise when one considers it in context of the entire project of Western liberalism. Indeed, the project's title is based on its ultimate promise: liberty. In this way, the freedom of each person moves beyond freedom as opposed to captivity, slavery, or oppression, and has been redefined to mean freedom from any binding structures. Having nothing that draws man together as citizens, at least nothing that goes beyond shallow campaign slogans, or words that are generic enough that they can mean all things to all people, the ground has been plowed to harvest identity politics. By losing our shared sense of culture, a recognition shared by Mark Lilla, James Davison Hunter, and Patrick Deneen, we have really become enslaved by the tyranny of the urgency.

> Culture and tradition are the result of accumulations of practice and experience that generations have willingly accrued and passed along as a gift to future generations. This inheritance is the result of a deeper freedom, the freedom of intergenerational interactions with the world and one another. It is the consequence of collected practice, and succeeding generations may alter it if their experience and practices lead to different conclusions.[2]

For Deneen, the end goal is that people will become free and experience "liberty after liberalism."[3] In order to accomplish this, he argues, similarly to Lilla, what is necessary is a rebuilding of a shared public life: "practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life. Not a better theory, but better practices."[4] While Lilla holds onto the false hope of

[2] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 190.

[3] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 197.

[4] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 197.

American liberalism as the answer to or shared vision for identity politics, Deneen points our attention away from the big dreams and instead calls smaller civic and religious communities to fulfill their responsibilities in society. Deneen's proposal has an affinity with the Lutheran teaching that in the exercise of their vocations, Christians have been called to serve their neighbors as individuals and communities gathered around and empowered by God's unique story within the wider world and in contrast to the world's alternative stories.

Because of the loss of binding structures in our society we have entered a state that James C. Edwards calls "normal nihilism." One way to understand nihilism is as a situation in which nothing is an authority, nothing has the final say. Moral appeals fail: There is no shared "god." Political appeals fail: If the Constitution limits a person, it must be the Constitution that is wrong. Historical appeals fail: People and events of the past are regularly erased because they fail to live up to the standards of today. Thus, there is no shared core conviction, nothing that unites us as people. This lack of unity matters for the church as it does for the state. Lutheran theology provides an antidote to the lack of unity through the teaching of two realms: God ruling in both church and state simultaneously. If the state belongs to God, and it does, the Christian is interested in its right functioning to properly apply God's law to all creatures. However, like much of Christian doctrine, the wisdom and opportunities that this antidote and story offer are only available to the Christian formed by faith. Only when they live under the reign and rule of God are Christians able to find the true unity of faith which is theirs in Christ Jesus. The world will never know or achieve this unity by any political or philosophical program, nor will the normal nihilism of the age allow it. This state of affairs does not change the Christian's faith, but rather calls the Christian deeper into the story that sustains it, whereby he is granted the eternal peace that passes all understanding.

As the last element of the second chapter I presented my fourfold lens through which to examine the dynamics effects of identity politics in secular and Christian expressions. By demonstrating how core convictions shape identity, relationship to the neighbor, and goals for the state, I have argued that proper engagement in the polis is possible when one finds the definition to the latter three under the core convictions—specifically, the Lutheran core convictions which align with a comprehensive account of God's work in the world in his two realms, and thus places identity, view the neighbor, and appropriate goals for the state in their proper theological framework. I have shown that in identity politics, however, personal or group identity puts itself in the place of the core convictions, thus damaging (or minimizing) the possibility of a proper relationship to the neighbor and goals for the state informed by our theological proposal. While the challenge of identity politics has recently become a concern, especially on the American left as noted by Lilla, the church has, in no small matter, been impacted by it.

In chapter three, therefore, I argued that Christians are often susceptible to the turn to identity politics, and that temptation extends to Christians of many stripes. The clearest example is the Christian Right, and in order to clearly demonstrate their attraction I traced the narrative of the Moral Majority through the eyes of Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson who had participated heavily in its beginnings, and had come to see that their engagement was less than optimal. From there, I examined the work of James Davison Hunter, demonstrating how the three groups he identifies as "defensive against," "relevance to," and "purity from" are all tempted to engage in different forms of identity politics. This is made especially clear when the concept of *ressentiment* is understood as "the moralizing revenge of the powerless." When Christians embrace a narrative of being marginalized, and justify their political involvement as faith put into action, the

temptation to identity politics becomes strong. Indeed, all three of Hunter's groups engage in identity politics, and often for different goals.

In chapter three, I also examined Hunter's own proposal of "faithful presence," wherein he advocates for Christians, positively, to be faithful to the call of God in whatever vocation they fill; but, negatively, to focus on working their way into positions of power to accomplish their goals. Hunter's admonition in the end weakens the state by making it an object of power for a few rather than the left-hand realm of God wherein our rights are secured and people are cared for. Hunter's model shows some promise, especially when the concept of vocation is fully understood, but it does not fully alleviate the concerns of a Christian turn to identity politics.

Finally, I looked at the work of D. G. Hart. Hart's analysis is helpful for understanding the uniquely American dynamics of faith, especially among Protestants. Hart demonstrates, for instance, the impact of revivalism and individualism in shaping the political roles of the churches in America. Further, his narrative illuminates the concerns of the group he calls the fundamentalists. Concerned with the change in society brought on by liberalism and the loss of binding structures and core convictions, the impending loss of a 'Christian America' produces the feelings of *ressentiment* necessary for fundamentalist engagement. For the group he calls 'liberals,' the *ressentiment* impetus was the need to promote a Social Gospel, something the fundamentalists ignored. Perhaps the most impactful part of Hart's for our purposes, however, is his recognition of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a confessionalist tradition in American Christianity—a church which shared moral concerns with fundamentalists, and thus often associated with them, while maintaining a unique posture because of her theology of the two realms (a teaching which Hart himself does not rightly understand). None of the groups presented by Hunter or Hart proved capable of passing the identity politics test of my fourfold

lens, opening the way for a Lutheran proposal for political engagement in response to identity politics.

In chapter four, I argued that Lutheran theology included the necessary building blocks for faithful engagement in a way that does not resort to identity politics. First, Lutheran core convictions recognize one God over all, reigning in two realms over things temporal and spiritual. These core convictions, as offered by Benne, are centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible, then extending out through Christian reflection. Only after having gone through her core convictions can a Lutheran begin considering specific points of legislation. In the process of viewing things this way, the Lutheran sees himself and his neighbor as fellow creatures of the same creator under the same core convictions, whether the neighbor recognizes them or not. Thus, the Christian is obligated to love his neighbor as himself, and serve him appropriately. This approach requires the Lutheran understanding of vocation.

When the times comes, the Lutheran views the state neither as an enemy to be conquered or, more commonly, as somehow transitioning into God's kingdom on earth. Indeed, in the two realms, the Lutheran understands the state as already existing as part of God's reign now leading to the ultimate eschaton wherein the left- and right-hand kingdoms are fused together. Thus, the Christian's goals for the state are modest and seek the welfare of his neighbor according to the law God has placed over us all.

Indeed, Christian engagement understood this way allows the Christian to care for his neighbor in a variety of ways, especially when that neighbor is marginalized by the state, or needs to have has needs met. In order to understand how this works, I examined the work of the CTCR and Leopoldo Sánchez to see how a Lutheran approach to immigration (an issue that is commonly fraught with identity politics) is different than the common arguments heard even

among Christians. Indeed, in regard to the immigration debate, for instance, the Lutheran response is neither to turn to the fourth commandment (sovereignty of the state) alone, nor to the fifth commandment (care for your neighbor's physical needs) alone. Rather, the Lutheran is able to make room for both, and that approach will lead him to advocate to the state on behalf of the neighbor in his midst. Thus Lutheran political engagement is wholly different than the engagement seen by most other Christians in attempting to bring about God's kingdom on earth. Lutherans hold that God's kingdom already exists, and he is ruling now through the two realms, and will bring both left and right, temporal and spiritual, state and church, into harmony at the Parousia, where God himself will reign visibly over a restored creation forever.

It is certainly possible that some may object to the arguments that I have made on behalf of the application of Lutheran theology to the challenge of identity politics. A few possible objections may be disagreeing with the issues I highlight in identity politics, or thinking my work too optimistic of its view of the state, or too hopeful about the promise of Lutheran theology to accomplish anything meaningful by seeking to serve "all" neighbors (in other words, by caring for immediate neighbors in vocation, do Lutherans ignore some, especially those of greatest need?).

As regards the critique that could come against the issues I highlight in identity politics, it seems to me that the issues are established as problematic by a wide variety of thinkers on both the left and right sides of the political aisle. Yet is it possible that by agreeing with them I have adopted a defense of "the old way" or the institutionalized problems in American politics? Indeed, a simple defense of "the old way," after noting the existence of marginalized neighbors, would sound a lot like the charge of quietism, and had my paper stopped at that point, I would be guilty as charged. However, the recognition of legitimate needs raised by identity politics, and

offering a constructive theological way to think about them, provides hope that nevertheless goes beyond identity politics when a Lutheran is faithfully, and not quietly or passively, engaged.

Some, particularly on the Christian Right, or in the pacifist movement, would argue that my work is too hopeful for the state. In response to that, I would argue two points: first, there has never been a time when the state functions perfectly, and there never will be on this side of the eschaton. In other words, there is always work to do, so I would not, and am not, arguing that the state alone can accomplish the goals. Second, and related, I would argue that the inability of the state to fully accomplish this demonstrates the need of the church to be the church, and to be faithful to God, then to the neighbors, and to demonstrate via her speech and leadership a respect for the state as equal partner of God in his reign. The state is not the ultimate good, but neither is it to be mocked or disregarded.

Finally, to the challenge that the Lutheran model of vocation potentially highlights one neighbor's needs over another's needs in an exclusive way, I would offer the following: the Lutheran theology of vocation is understood in such a way that there will naturally be levels of relationships. A pastor ought to be most aware of his wife and children's needs, but also acutely aware of the needs of his congregation, and generally aware of the needs of his community. In the same way, vocation allows Lutherans to advocate on behalf of the neighbor they are most intimately connected to, and to have a latitude of grace in dealing with those who are less connected to him. This theology of vocation functions as a form of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity proposes that the smallest competent authority at the local level can best take care of local problems. Similarly, vocation assumes that, in the context of an authentic relationship, one's ability to care for the neighbor next door is far greater than his ability to care for someone across the nation. A Christian will be impacted by issues in his local community more often than by the

issues in the nation as a whole and so he will rightly focus his actions accordingly, even if the issues and causes seem perhaps less glamorous or significant than those making headlines. Thus for Lutherans, vocational living suggests a degree of citizenship which is most active and aware at the local level. A key part of the exercise of vocation is advocating for God's justice to be given and will to be done on behalf of neighbors we have been called to serve, so that all neighbors' needs will be acknowledged and dealt with. Thus, the Lutheran is not necessarily ignoring any neighbor when seeing vocation in terms of degrees of proximity to neighbors, but serving best the one that God has placed immediately in front of him. At the same time, Lutherans are called not to ignore the command to love the neighbor who might not immediately (and thus seemingly) "fit" into his vocation(s) anytime the opportunity arises.

Other critiques may be out there concerning my analysis of identity politics and fourfold lens used to assess its concerns. Although the analysis offered has engaged significant literature in this area, and provided a framework that aligns with concerns raised by identity politics, I welcome other critiques and perspectives. On the constructive proposal towards political engagement, my work stands not on a particular definition of identity politics, nor does it stand for a particular political agenda, but rather on a responsible reading of the biblical account of God's care for his world through the Lutheran teaching of the two realms and vocation. My account seeks to be based in the narrative of Scripture, to advocate for faithful political engagement in a world of identity politics, and to call Christians to keep their proper identity in mind at all times as they assess politics and life in the polis. This Christian identity, as a baptized child of God, obligates Lutherans to strive for fulfilling God's will in his creation, yet assures them of forgiveness when they fail. In the end, this salvation is the remedy our world needs.

Finally, there are a few other avenues of research that should follow from the ideas and

issues touched on in this dissertation. Of primary interest is the question: "How does this translate practically into the Lutheran pulpit?" The sermon by Robert Jeffress engaged above would not pass any examination of Lutheran preaching. There is no mention of Jesus, let alone his sacrificial life, death and resurrection for us. There is no pointing to the forgiveness of sins, or love of neighbor. If a Lutheran pastor were to give a sermon in that environment—the inauguration of a United States President who was a member of his church, perhaps—what might his message be? Further, how do we talk about the legitimate issues raised in identity politics from the pulpit? The year 2020 might prove fertile in researching this, as many pastors have found their sermons newly available online, and identity politics kinds of *ressentiment*-laden issues have frequently come to the surface in our national discourse.

A second area for further study would be to ascertain the implications of identity for mission work—in other words, "how does this this Lutheran understanding of identity translate into other cultures?" This is especially interesting, in my opinion, when considering cultures which have no previous understanding of who God is, let alone his two realms of operation. Today, a common charge is made that most American missionaries were imperialists, ultimately striving to take over the lands they evangelized in the name of the United States. To what extent does a critique of identity politics help in the assessment of such claims? Examining the work of William Richards, for instance, and his understanding of identity in his work in both evangelizing Hawaii, then serving as a diplomat for King Kamehameha III, may allow us to see the work in a more favorable light than is often granted. Or, in cases, where American missionaries have been influenced by identity politics, what might their training look like before they go out to the field? Moreover, how might a Lutheran perspective on political engagement help missionaries help others assess and navigate life amidst marginalized neighbors, in

dysfunctional states, while also embodying a winsome confidence in one's identity as a child of God called to serve in his world in the name of Jesus?

In the end the challenges of identity politics are plentiful. Plentiful in that these challenges are recognized by many political commentators and observers who highlight the vast diversity of fragmented people's groups turning to identity politics for political care today. But also plentiful in that the proposals to address this fragmentation today through some shared vision of America highlight the shortcomings or flaws of the American reliance on the philosophy of liberalism to address the problem. In that light, the turn to identity politics is neither surprising nor uniquely problematic, yet it does carry new challenges for the church as she thinks about her engagement in the world. Insofar as identity politics draws attention to the legitimate concerns of marginalized groups, it can remind the church to recognize, along with the state, the needs of neighbors which are not being met in the state. At the same time, in dealing with such needs from her informed theological identity, the church may at times have to speak in love but truthfully against the agendas of some groups insofar as they run contrary to the doctrines of the church. Moreover, the church (or various parachurch organizations within it) must be vigilant lest she herself turn to identity politics in order to advocate for her own desires. It is certainly tempting for the church to settle for the power of the world rather than the power of God. Thus the challenge of identity politics calls the church to reclaim her own identity in Christ and operate according to her own story as she engages her neighbors in the world around.

The Lutheran model of engagement—vocational, two realms living—provides Lutherans with the ability to discern properly the needs of this world, and especially one's suffering neighbors, and advocate rightly for them according to God's commands in his temporal realm. Further, the Lutheran model allows the Christian to speak boldly the truth of God's commands

for life in the state because this model recognizes the state as belonging to God and used by God for his purposes. Finally, our model responds directly and helpfully to the challenges raised by identity politics, but not by offering alternative political responses to such challenges. Instead, our Lutheran approach to political engagement fosters responses formed by the core convictions God has given to his church; and it is springing from and shaped by those unchanging, God-given convictions that Christians seek to embody in and through their daily vocations the love of God in Christ for all of his creation.

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VITA

Michael Brian Hanson

December 24, 1983

Appleton, WI

Collegiate Institutions Attended

Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, WI, B.A., 2006

Graduate Institutions Attended

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, MDiv., 2010

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, Ph.D., 2021