

BOOK REVIEW

Justin Giboney et al. *Compassion (&) Conviction: The AND Campaign's Guide to Faithful Civic Engagement*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020. 147 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-4810-2. \$22.00.

Quite appropriately for a volume addressing civic engagement, each of the authors boasts extensive experience in the political arena. Justin Giboney is a lawyer and political strategist who previously served as a DNC delegate; Michael Wear worked on President Obama's 2012 re-election campaign as the director for faith outreach; Chris Butler, meanwhile, heads up the Chicago Embassy Church Network and has worked to involve churches and faith-based organizations in community involvement.

Divided into eight chapters, the authors write from the conviction that, in their American context, all Christians are inherently political, as evidenced by their assertion, “We can choose to not exercise the duties of citizenship, but that does not mean we do not have them” (3). When Christians do engage, they must view it as a duty and an expression of love, as “politics . . . provides a forum for advocating for our neighbor’s well-being and pursuing justice” (11).

The first three chapters cover “Christians (&) Politics,” “Church (&) State,” and “Compassion (&) Conviction,” respectively. The authors are forthright concerning the church’s moral failures, such as its silence on atrocities like the Indian Removal Act. While recognizing that Scripture does not prescribe what form of government a nation ought to adopt, they contend that believers should act as the exiles in Babylon, pursuing the welfare of the city while recognizing their distinct identity. Throughout Scripture, the relationship between God’s people and the state is indeed complicated: “church and state serve different functions,

and although Christians are called to challenge state injustices when necessary, the fact remains that government is a God-ordained institution” (30). Though a Christian’s allegiance is never to the state first, they may still contribute to its flourishing. Given its divinely ordained purpose, it is reasonable that they would do so. Yet, as the authors stress in chapter 3, a Christian must do so from a gospel-centred standpoint. “It’s a mistake,” they charge, “to suggest that Christians should always come to the same political conclusions. However, all Christians should make those decisions from a biblical framework” (37).

Chapter 4 focuses on “Partnerships (&) Partisanship,” followed by “Messaging (&) Rhetoric” in chapter 5 and “Politics (&) Race” in chapter 6. While highlighting the importance of caution in political partnerships, the authors acknowledge that partnering with non-believers can sometimes produce fruitful results, as during the civil rights movement. They stress that Christians must remain informed and hopeful regarding cultural engagement, but never hide their convictions in the public square. Moreover, they must not become so engrossed in the rhetoric of their particular tribe that they end up explaining away—or forthrightly disregarding—biblical principles in order to justify a partisan agenda. “Christians are continually urged,” they argue, “to disregard the plain directives in the Bible and asked whether the Bible really says that certain things are actually sinful In politics, groups sometimes reduce complicated matters to simplistic buzzwords to fit their narrative or complicate more straightforward matters to obscure the truth,” an error which believers must firmly reject (75). Tragically, chapter 6 documents how many commit this very sin on issues of race. Though historically even many abolitionists did not “advocate the full inclusion and equality of African Americans in society or in the church” (96), the authors point out a number of biblical narratives in which racism in the body of Christ is confronted and condemned—most notably Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Gal 2.

The volume concludes with a discussion of “Advocacy (&) Protest” in chapter 7 and “Civility (&) Political Culture” in chapter 8. Contrary to those for whom protest and advocacy are dirty words, the authors depict them as a vehicle to ensure justice is

upheld. Not only is there biblical precedent for such action, but “Because we live in a democracy,” they argue, “Romans 13:1 is not an injunction against protest and advocacy, but a mandate for it” (110). Indeed, the sense of injustice a Christian experiences when they see someone go hungry, for example, is an outworking of Scripture’s teaching on human dignity. To speak on behalf of the oppressed is not a secular impulse, but a Christlike one. “As Christians our approach to protest and advocacy should reflect the moral light we have been called to,” they assert (108). “Our political actions should be honest, humble, respectful of human dignity—even of those we disagree with—and free from guile” (108).

Finally, the authors conclude with an “exhortation” to allow the gospel to drive the reader’s approach to politics, as this will add “special grace” to their endeavor (127). A Christian view of politics must never be marked by selfishness: “We do not enter this space,” they assert, “simply to pursue our own interests but to seek the good of others” (127). This is a markedly different approach from the one many evangelicals in the West are quick to adopt. With the collapse of Christendom, the structure that has long protected the social privilege of the church and its members, the notion of protecting one’s rights and maintaining that place of privilege all too often dominates the church’s approach to politics. Yet the authors emphasize that, “Our purpose in civic engagement is not to make our own names great but to make known the greatness of the One who sends us. Our great desire is to be agents of the will of God in the earth, distribution centers for the love of God” (129). Indeed, this purpose can all too often be obscured by a combative, culture war-oriented outlook, whether one is of a left wing, centrist, or right leaning persuasion.

The practicality of this book alone makes it worth the read. Many Christians will pay lip service to the idea of more thoughtful civic engagement; however, a clear strength of this work is how it describes in detail what that entails. Drawing on figures such as William Wilberforce, Frederick Douglass, and Catherine Booth, the authors envision a brand of politics focused on the good of one’s neighbour and universal human dignity. More

importantly, they stress that the public witness of the church—not the advancement of one’s preferred causes and policies—should be the Christian’s greatest concern. “Christians must keep in mind that we aren’t engaging primarily to win political battles or to serve our own interest,” they assert, arguing that “When in conflict we should demonstrate that our public witness is more important than winning a political battle” (17).

Refreshingly, they also reject the false dilemmas that pervade much contemporary political discourse, such as the notion one must be either for “social justice or family values,” or in favor of women’s rights or those of the unborn (38). As a Canadian myself, some of the content was not directly applicable; many international readers would find the American two-party system irrelevant to their context and might even partially blame it for creating some of the false dilemmas the book denounces. Yet, the underlying principles of civility, self-sacrifice, and generous disagreement that pervade the book make it a useful tool for non-American Christians as well, particularly those in other Western democracies.

Moreover, far too many individuals conceive of their nation in a simplistic light as a beacon to the world or hopelessly problematic. Butler, Wear, and Giboney, however, are quick to denounce America’s sins of racism and abortion on the one hand, while respecting its democratic institutions and frequent willingness to correct past mistakes on the other. This demonstrates a mature sense of balance, giving their vision potential to bring together liberals and conservatives alike who may share a starkly different view of their nation.

The typical reader might interact effectively with this book on several fronts. First, it is very much addressed to the ordinary Christian citizen. It is easily accessible even to readers with minimal knowledge of democratic principles and governance, even taking the time to explain basic facets of the American system. The biblical-theological student, as anyone else, ought to allow this resource to inform how they vote, become involved in their community, converse with local civic leaders, and even approach issues on social media.

Moreover, the authors include questions and exercises that

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coincide with each chapter designed for small group discussions. These may prove particularly useful during election season, when pastors often find themselves shepherding a divided congregation. The authors note, with implied incredulity, “We have even heard reports of people physically fighting in church after Trump was elected” (124). While disagreement is sometimes inevitable, and not necessarily unhealthy, perhaps such deep animosity could be averted were believers to talk about their differences in a civil manner.

Finally, the book could be of use in any post-secondary course which focuses on political or public theology, those with a substantial interest in social/political ethics, or an introductory political science class at a Christian liberal arts college. As previously noted, it is not an academic monograph; yet, for students who will inevitably grapple with political issues in their both personal and professional lives, this book is an excellent tool.

Personally, I have not come across a book where the authors so effectively allow their model of political engagement to flow from their theology—an all too rare trend in evangelicalism where one can often get the impression that the opposite is more commonplace. They also recognize that Scripture does not speak directly to every single issue, and thus provide “a simple framework that allows for disagreement” (54). Such an approach helps Christian readers to thoughtfully consider how to approach particular issues and allows for sincere differences, avoiding proof texting to support one’s own positions. This work will come as a breath of fresh air to those disillusioned with a partisan, petty form of engagement who long for a more kingdom-centred way to broach political matters.

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