

# Advocating *for* Justice

AN EVANGELICAL VISION  
FOR TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS  
AND STRUCTURES

Stephen Offutt, F. David Bronkema,  
Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy,  
Robb Davis, Gregg Okesson

  
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# Acknowledgments

The authors of this book are a diverse bunch. Collectively, we bridge the gap between scholar and practitioner. Some of us are employed by academic institutions while others of us live and breathe in the daily world of policy and politics. We are scattered across the United States—from Washington, DC, to California. We attend different churches in different denominations. We have had different faith and life experiences. We are, in many ways, an unlikely team.

And yet we are bound together by two basic beliefs: evangelicals are actively involved in carrying out God’s mission in the world and evangelicals have curiously left a very effective tool—advocacy—to one side in the midst of their efforts. Our team has come together to examine why this might be the case and to encourage evangelicals to weave advocacy into the fabric of their religious lives and communities. If evangelicals take up this call, we also believe that they can become more faithful followers of Jesus while quite possibly having a greater impact on the world around them. Some evangelicals in the global church have recently begun to move in this direction. The time is right for a book that can deepen reflection and provide some guidance for such initiatives.

Throughout the writing process, our team has sought to be led by the Holy Spirit. We have begun and ended each of our meetings in prayer. We have hoped to embody 2 Timothy 2:15, which in the King James Version begins, “Study to show thyself approved unto God.” Our biblically grounded approach has had the effect of allowing the writing of this book to be a blessing to us. We have learned a great deal from each other and forged lasting friendships in the process.

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*Part 1*



# The Problem Defined

# 1

## An Evangelical Approach to Advocacy

### *Definitions and Underpinnings*

Rachel is a widow in present-day Uganda. She and her children are being kicked off their land because they do not have a formal land title. Laws that prioritize male inheritance allowed her dead husband's nephew to claim the house as his own. Unwilling to enter into an exploitive and abusive relationship, Rachel and her children beg on the street for food.

Rachel's story, and others like it in many parts of the globe, is strikingly similar to that of Naomi and Ruth of the Old Testament. When death took Naomi's husband and sons, it meant a life of poverty for her and Ruth, her daughter-in-law. Ruth, however, found favor with Boaz, a farm owner who allowed her to "glean" from his fields, a practice of taking leftovers from the harvest that God had enshrined into law to protect the poor (Lev. 23:22). Boaz, therefore, used this power to guarantee the application of God's legislation.

Not everyone uses power as wisely as Boaz. In fact, just about anybody who has worked with the poor (or watched the news) has witnessed power being used illegally, unfairly, or unproductively. Misuse of power in these situations either causes or perpetuates the poverty at hand. It might be a landlord who is not making needed repairs to an apartment, gangs that demand protection payments, neighborhoods that outlaw homeless shelters, police



who inappropriately use force or demand bribes, poor communities without funds for primary education because of structural adjustment policies in the global South, trade agreements negotiated through threats, or women being beaten with impunity. In each case, people with power are impoverishing and dehumanizing those who cannot fend for themselves and who do not have a seat at the table.

Evangelical Christians who come face-to-face with such injustices are forced into prayerful decisions: Is God calling us to become involved in the often-risky business of “advocacy”? Ought we to engage the power of the government, whether through the police, the courts, the bureaucracy, or the legislature, to right these wrongs? If so, how can we approach advocacy in ways that glorify God? Far too often, evangelicals do not know how to answer these questions. As a result, we either do nothing, thus committing sins of omission, or we do things that are neither effective nor God honoring.

We, the authors, believe that Christians are called to political engagement on behalf of others. Thus this book has two main objectives. The first is to help evangelical Christians debate, discuss, and discern more fully the nature and scope of God’s call to evangelical advocacy and to open themselves up to following that call. The second is to guide evangelicals responding to that call into advocacy work that is prayerful, faithful, and wise.

To accomplish these goals, we divide the book into three major sections. First, we explain the evangelical community’s current relationship with advocacy and how we came to be in this situation. Second, we lay out a theology of advocacy, exploring the nature of God as it relates to concepts of advocacy. Finally, we provide practical lessons and narrate experiences showing how a faith community might strengthen its relationship with the Triune God and be faithful in its call to advocacy. In this chapter we begin by explaining what we mean by certain words and concepts that are important to our narrative.

## What Is Advocacy?

The word “advocacy,” like all powerful words and labels, is used in different ways. The word has been significantly “depoliticized” in evangelical circles, especially when evangelical definitions are compared to the word’s technical definition and how it is used in human rights movements around the world. The more common political definition, which we use as the basis for our approach in this book, better serves a discussion of effective, holistic advocacy.

### *Depoliticized Definitions*

“Advocacy” in evangelical circles often signifies a personal approach. It connotes a volunteer role such as that of a donor, sponsor, or one who commits time to the cause of an organization. In these cases, the word chosen is a noun—a person may be an “advocate”—rather than a verb. Compassion International’s child sponsorship program, for example, uses this definition and approach,<sup>1</sup> with a robust “brand advocacy” department encouraging supporters to invite others to get involved in the cause of remedying child poverty. Here advocacy is about raising awareness and encouraging others to do so, aiding one person in need, or directing one’s time, talent, and resources toward a certain cause or issue. This cause-marketing approach bases its work on the premise that if more people know about a crisis, more can be done. The rationale behind personal advocacy is the belief that once an issue, in this case child suffering, is better understood, more money and resources will be dedicated to alleviating the problem. This model has been hugely successful for Compassion International, greatly enhancing its ability to lift children, one by one, out of some of the most impoverished places around the globe.

A second use of the word “advocacy” in evangelical circles is similar to the first but has a more professional orientation. Advocacy in this sense seeks support for a particular cause and begins to incorporate policy-related elements. Organizations like World Vision, for example, hire professional staff to “advocate” for government grants or to promote the interests of the organization. (We note in later chapters other innovative and grassroots forms of advocacy in which World Vision is engaged.) This implies an engagement with the state by lobbyists who are trying to win bids for important project support. Such activities are considered necessary because of the competitive process of influencing Congress and the officials of a presidential administration concerning critical budget and policy decisions. World Vision became involved in this type of advocacy earlier than most. Their office personnel in Washington, DC, started “in the early 1980s to do ‘professional advocacy’ and pre-position World Vision to get US government grants and bring the needs of children to policy makers.”<sup>2</sup> In sum, depoliticized approaches to advocacy have been useful in allowing faith-based organizations to reach certain organizational objectives and, ultimately, serve greater numbers of the poor and vulnerable in societies around the world.

1. Compassion International, “Resource Guide: Equipping Your Personal Ministry with Compassion, Spring 2015. <http://www.compassionmedia.com/pdf/compassion-resource-guide-spring-2015.pdf>.

2. Robert Zachritz, email to Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, March 10, 2015.

### *Political Definitions*

The problem with this, however, is that the use of the term “advocacy” to connote a depoliticized, primarily financial and personnel-driven approach is significantly at odds with the etymological, historical, and broader current use of the word. Indeed, the vast sector of organizations engaging governments on a whole host of economic, social, cultural, and political issues has an entirely different idea of what advocacy means. This mainstream approach to advocacy is consistent with the medieval Latin word *advocare*, which means “to summon to one’s aid.” The word “advocacy” appears in English, possibly for the first time in late Middle English, in the mid-fourteenth century. It is used in conjunction with the word “advocate,” or “one whose profession is to plead cases in a court of justice.”<sup>3</sup>

Advocacy of this kind is still what the term most commonly means today. Contemporary scholars have thus defined it as “organized efforts and actions [intended] . . . to influence public attitudes and to enact and implement laws and public policies so that visions of ‘what should be’ in a just, decent society become a reality.”<sup>4</sup> Another technical definition argues that advocacy is “an organized political process that involves the coordinated efforts of people to change policies, practices, ideas, and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.”<sup>5</sup> Such definitions clearly take advocacy in directions that are different from how many evangelical organizations currently use the term.

### *The Underpinnings of the Political Definition of Advocacy*

An awareness of the political dimensions of any work in social change underpins the political definition and understanding of advocacy work. Witness, for example, this testimony from an American Christian who previously spent time in Guatemala:

I believed that if Guatemalan children needed a school, then the local church could open one, and volunteer groups could partner with local churches by assisting in construction and providing student sponsorships. However, if the community lacked a school due to corruption in the local municipality or central government, was our help just enabling the government to continue in its injustice? How should we have balanced the need to address institutional injustice, the children’s immediate educational needs, and the fact that challenging government corruption could take years? Unfortunately, we did not know any

3. *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

4. Cohen, de la Vega, and Watson, *Advocacy for Social Justice*, 7–8.

5. VeneKlasen et al., *New Weave*, 23.

veteran expatriates, or even Guatemalan brothers and sisters who were wrestling with these issues. If I were in Guatemala today, the questions I would be asking would be much deeper in substance and the relational connections I would pursue would be much broader in context.<sup>6</sup>

Structural issues lie at the root of reflective engagement with poverty. The prevalence of these issues shows how contexts in need of relief or development also need advocacy or policy work. Without the latter set of activities, the root causes of impoverishing situations remain unaddressed. The tropes used to address these situations include extensions of the venerable proverb, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; show him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”: make room on the bank of the river for the person to fish, and finally, stop the factory upstream from dumping chemicals that are killing the fish. A more recent and popular analogy used in educational materials references townspeople mobilizing to rescue and care for babies floating through their town in the river (or youth or adults floating in the river who had been beaten) and eventually deciding to go upstream to see who is throwing these babies (or people) into the river in the first place to stop the problem at its source. The idea and label of “upstream” analysis and action also has a distinguished history in the annals of justice work and is one that we find logical, compelling, and biblical in terms of the underpinnings and nature of the complex, difficult, and challenging “political” advocacy work.<sup>7</sup>

The nature and practice of advocacy defined along political lines have at least five dimensions. First, advocacy is done to bring about change, and more specifically changes in policies, laws, and/or the enforcement of laws. Second, the desired change either (1) addresses a systemic injustice or personal abuse of power and authority that leads to poverty, exclusion, or human oppression, or (2) addresses unproductive policies that are not necessarily a matter of justice but that constrain human flourishing in some way, such as setting the minimum wage too high or too low.<sup>8</sup> Third, when injustice is an underlying cause of poverty, it may be so in at least two senses: (1) though not a proximate cause of poverty, the injustice keeps people from accessing the resources needed to

6. Shana Davis, Eastern University master’s student, correspondence with Krisanne Vailancourt Murphy, July 24, 2014.

7. The *Upstream Journal*, started in the 1970s, is a source for tropes such as these (“Upstream Journal,” <http://www.upstreamjournal.org/>). Another online resource for such thinking is the Upstream website (“Upstream”).

8. We realize that some people will define certain issues as issues of justice, and others will not. At the very least, we believe that the language of “unproductive policies” can help bridge the divide in a productive way, recognizing at the same time that defining whether an issue is an issue of justice or not is very much worth the conversation.

move out of poverty (a lack of income is a proximate cause of poverty, but an underlying cause might be, for example, a policy that restricts access to education needed to escape the poverty trap), and (2) though on the surface the injustice is done by an individual, it may also somehow be produced and perpetuated by the system. Fourth, when injustice is part of a system, an organized process of engaging the problem is required. This is because complex systems are hard to change but also because powerful interests may seek to maintain the status quo. And finally, the organized process of engaging the problem focuses on those who have the power to actually do something about it.

### *Theological Definitions*

All of these definitions provide some semblance of truth. But in the big picture advocacy is seen in light of the character of God, because all reality begins and ends with God. Humans participate in God's reality through faithfulness to living (and representing) God's reign over the world. To explain this in biblical language, we image God. "God" may seem a strange place to begin talking about the political sphere, in part because Christians have perpetrated great evil through the centuries by the misguided use of God. But misuse should not imply retreat.

We state this up front because the topic of this book takes us into realms of competing ideologies and of power struggles (some of which come prepackaged with what could be called "sacred energy," where people claim holiness on their side) that polarize, conflate, and distort. Sadly, evangelicals also succumb to these temptations, lending triumphalistic, combative, or polemical energy to their advocacy work. But this is not God's way in the world.

By beginning with God, we seek to enter into an entirely different view of advocacy. As we will see in chapter 3, God's advocacy begins with the Trinity, spills over into creation, and embodies a different kind of power in the world predicated upon a different kind of kingship.<sup>9</sup> God graciously allows humans to participate in his rule through being "image bearers," which helps inform how we engage in the world (and thus how we do advocacy). The clearest picture for this is found in Jesus Christ, who ushers in the kingdom—that is, his rule in the world—through the Holy Spirit (our Advocate) and shares this rule with the Church<sup>10</sup> in order to bring all things in heaven and earth

9. Scot McKnight says it best: "The character of the king shapes the character of the kingdom." *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 131.

10. We refer to the church with a small "c" when speaking of local congregations and with a large "C" when referring to the universal Church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic), spanning across time and geography.

under himself (Eph. 1:10). By talking thus, we are not implying that we want to reduce God's character (and thus his rule) to a singular concept such as advocacy, as if hijacking Scripture for our own purposes; on the contrary, we desire to understand human advocacy by looking at God's advocacy.

While the word "advocate" is not prominent in the Old Testament, biblical writers paint a multifaceted picture of advocacy taking place in the ancient Near East, whether humans stand as advocates before God, humans before other humans, God before humans, or God on behalf of humans. God advocates on behalf of humans in many kinds of situations, whether for Israel to return to the Lord in the face of idolatry; for the sake of the nations that surround Israel; or on behalf of the poor, aliens, widows, and orphans. As this implies, the entire Old Testament can be understood through the metaphor of God's advocacy as a means of "a rendering of truth and a version of reality that are urged over and against other renderings and versions."<sup>11</sup> God reorients Israel to himself for the sake of the nations and justice for the oppressed.

In the New Testament, the word sometimes translated "advocate" (*paraklētos*) comes into prominence, referring to one who speaks on behalf of another in court. John would use the term "advocate" to describe the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) and Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1), offering a picture of how the Persons of the Trinity testify on our behalf before the world. In the church, we embody these realities through the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. We advocate because we have the Advocate. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will unpack these ideas with greater depth.

We believe these theological realities need to inform how we go about advocacy work. We advocate for others and learn and work with them to advocate for themselves (especially people trapped in poverty, widows, aliens, and orphans) because God advocates for us. And we do so by being faithful to the way that God advocates for the world: through service, love, weakness, and even suffering. Our faithfulness to God's nature, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, *images* his character (and thus his rule) to the world as a means of witness. We believe this is done best through the local church (chap. 5).<sup>12</sup> And as we bear witness to God, we also grow in conformity to the image of the Son. Thus, if done well, advocacy becomes a means of discipleship.

11. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, xvii. Brueggemann even uses the word "advocacy" in the subtitle of his book: *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*.

12. As we will explain later, this does not mean that every church member needs to have specialized knowledge in political advocacy, but that only together as a local congregation (and working with other Christians) can we faithfully represent God before the world, inclusive of the political realm. Or as Scot McKnight explains, "What Christians want for the nation should first be a witnessed reality in their local church. Until that local church embodies that desire for the nation, the church's witness has no credibility." *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 102.

We choose to focus on problems that come under the purview of the government at the local, state, national, and international levels. We do not rule out the importance of organized action by civil society to negotiate social changes with, say, corporate leaders<sup>13</sup> or larger social groupings who can collectively decide to act or live differently. In fact, we would encourage these kinds of actions. However, this book focuses on engaging the state for the good of society because evangelicals so consistently shy away from doing so. Our approach demands a synthesis of theology, social theory, and practice, as will be seen in our chosen definition of advocacy in the rest of this book.

### *Our Definition, Focus, and Approach*

In a thoroughly evangelical definition and approach to advocacy, we see good biblical and theological reasons for ensuring that the political connotations of the word “advocacy” are kept front and center. First, doing so allows us to point the spotlight on what most evangelical actors who are involved in charitable, compassionate, relief and development endeavors have overlooked: the political dimensions of the contexts in which they are operating, dimensions that almost always have a deep impact on structuring the situations of the poor and vulnerable. Second, it allows us to combine the notions of charity and justice,<sup>14</sup> both of which are essential to understanding

13. We are acutely aware that the private sector, too, for understandable reasons (Lindblom, *Politics and Markets*), holds significant power in society, far more than does “civil society.” As a result, it has been the target of advocacy actions when it abuses its power. Methods have been used that range from the voluntaristic (boycotts, shareholder advocacy, and corporate social responsibility) to a variety of state regulation strategies. However, there is no escaping the fact that advocacy often is, and must be, directed toward policies that set the best possible context for business activities so as to enable and encourage entrepreneurial spirit, the provision of jobs, and the creation of wealth where business is fulfilling its ministry. We believe that the business world should legitimately engage in advocacy, and often it does, as when businesses hold governments accountable for laws, policies, and procedures. Therefore, much if not all of what we write in this book applies to that sector as well. Analyzing the role that business has played in advocacy efforts as well as the corresponding shifts specifically in the business sector that are required for it to engage in transformational advocacy are beyond the scope of this book. For two arguments that begin to explore that line of thinking, see Bronkema and Brown, “Business as Mission”; Bronkema, “Business as Ministry.” See also Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God*, for a take on the role of business in society.

14. Justice is a foundational concept for this study. We argue that humans undertake justice because God is a God of justice (see Jer. 22:16); hence, we image his justice in the world. Scholars look at justice from many different vantage points, including rectifying, distributive, or what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls primary justice, which deals with the rights and dignity of others built upon the Judeo-Christian image-of-God concept. See Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. However, digging deeply into the nature, role, and rhetoric of justice is beyond the scope of this book. Beyond Wolterstorff’s two books on the subject, the other being *Justice in Love*, see also Keller for the lack of an agreed-upon definition of justice in our culture, and how

any engagement with the state and state power from a Christian perspective. Third, it helps point to essential aspects of God’s character that have been ignored and that are particularly pertinent to a theology of advocacy, which is sorely missing in evangelical circles, and which we develop in chapter 3. God, as revealed in Scripture time and time again, advocates for all humanity through the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, and is an advocate for poor and vulnerable people. The God of the Bible is a God who yearns for justice for the poor in the face of unjust structures and systems. We advocate because God advocates for the world. Our advocacy must be faithful to God’s advocacy for us to be faithful.

God is also a God of power, who created and structured power, giving it to individuals and institutions, including the state, with the intent of empowering all people so that they might flourish. The God of Israel set up structures of power through laws governing the economic, political, and social systems. Such laws were designed to give power and protection to all people, including the poor and vulnerable. The enforcement of these laws was a matter of justice and a matter of concern to society as a whole, especially given God’s warnings about what would happen if power was used to oppress rather than empower.<sup>15</sup> This is seen perhaps most starkly in the inclusion of the Jubilee year in Israel’s economic system, which was intended to guarantee all Israelites access to land.<sup>16</sup> Land is empowering; it enables people to create wealth and meet their own basic needs. The concern over how power might be misused is also seen in God’s creation of the political system of laws that protected the vulnerable from exploitation and oppression by others.

Taking theological and political considerations into account, *we define evangelical transformational advocacy as intentional acts of witness by the body of Christ that hold people and institutions accountable for creating, implementing, and sustaining just and good policies and practices geared*

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the word is at times used as a “trump card” to put an end to debates: *Generous Justice*, 149–50. See Benson and Heltzel’s edited volume *Evangelicals and Empire* on “prophetic evangelicals” and how “justice within shalom” is at the center of their theology (p. 8); see Schlossberg, Samuel, and Sider, *Christianity and Economics*, for extensive considerations of the meaning and types of biblical justice and its application to issues of poverty; see Rundle’s edited volume *Economic Justice in a Flat World* on economic justice from an evangelical perspective. For justice as discipleship and evangelism, see Eugene Cho, *Overrated*, 42–51. The words “social justice” no longer seem to be a taboo for many evangelicals, a process of evolution documented by Schmalzbauer, “Whose Social Justice?,” with the concept of “the common good” also appearing more and more in the writing of evangelicals of all stripes: Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*; Skillen, *Good of Politics*; Gushee, *New Evangelical Manifesto*; Monsma, *Healing for a Broken World*; Volf, *Public Faith*.

15. See, for example, Jer. 22:13–17; 23:10–14; Amos 3:10; Mic. 3.

16. Lev. 25:8–54.



*toward the flourishing of society. Transformational advocacy challenges injustice and obstacles to human flourishing at whatever level it is practiced by humbly engaging with people who can address the wrong, trusting God's Spirit to change all those involved as well as the institutions themselves.*

Our definition makes explicit the fact that we are directing this book toward everyday Christians, not Christians who are professionally engaged in public life. Christians in politics and government—those who formally participate in the process of legislation and policy creation—play a critical role in allowing faith to influence local, state, national, and international decisions and priorities. But other books and articles take these actors into account.<sup>17</sup> We instead consider the role of Christians who are part of civil society and the private sector as well as people who are part of local communities, organizations, businesses, and families.<sup>18</sup> We are also writing this book specifically as a call to “evangelical” Christians who have been uncertain, skeptical, or even cynical about approaching governments for God’s good in the world. To that end, in what follows we look more closely at the word “evangelical” and introduce the spiritual dimensions of our approach.

## What Is an Evangelical?

Given that our book is written about and for the evangelical community, we need to answer a surprisingly difficult question: what is an evangelical? We believe evangelicals are *those who feel compelled to share the “good news” or the “evangel” of Christ’s death and resurrection, who hold a high regard for the Bible, and who believe the Holy Spirit is active in the world today.* To this empirical definition we add and wish to emphasize an aspirational clause: *and who are strongly committed to making disciples.* Although discipleship is not always part of evangelical life, it is certainly part of the evangelical ideal, and is always part of the equation in the healthiest and most mature evangelical

17. Some of the best recent books that describe evangelical Christians in politics include Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power* and Swartz, *Moral Minority*. Books hoping to influence how evangelicals use political power include Grudem, *Politics according to the Bible* and Sider, *Just Politics*. There are also massive numbers of articles in publications like *Christianity Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* that have covered public servants who are also people of faith.

18. Good scholarship has also been done about approaches taken to politics by Christians who are not professional politicians. Those that are particularly helpful include Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*; Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*; Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*; and Kellstedt et al., “Religious Voting Blocs.” Although we draw on this literature, our goal is not to contribute to it. Rather, we are looking to improve evangelical advocacy, which is a particular form of evangelical public engagement.

communities. Thus we locate transformational advocacy within the practice of evangelical discipleship.<sup>19</sup>

Our definition of “evangelical” is consistent with other authoritative definitions. David Bebbington’s oft-used definition of “evangelical” is centered on four principles: an emphasis on conversion or a need for change in one’s life, an active bent toward sharing the gospel, a high regard for the Bible, and an emphasis on Christ’s atoning work on the cross.<sup>20</sup> The National Association of Evangelicals approaches the term slightly differently in its statement of faith, which includes an affirmation of belief in the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ and a high view of Scripture, among other doctrinal points.<sup>21</sup> The Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom asserts that evangelicals are passionate about God, the Church, and the Bible. Evangelicals have committed to living their lives with Jesus, and they encourage others to do so as well.<sup>22</sup>

What makes our definition somewhat unique is our explicit inclusion of the practice of discipleship. We are convinced of the need to link discipleship with evangelism. We are also convinced of the need to integrate advocacy into the understanding of discipleship and to make it part of the daily and ongoing activities of the body of Christ. Discipleship means helping one another to grow in conformity to the image of God in Christ Jesus. We trust that this will happen *in the lives of others* as we give witness to the kingdom of God before the rulers and authorities and *within ourselves* as we sensitively, lovingly, prayerfully, and faithfully embody God’s reign on earth. We argue that evangelicals should consider transformational advocacy as a ministry on par with any other, and one to which God may call people at any time and for any length of time. It is up to local faith communities, in naming the unique giftedness of each of their members, to prayerfully discern God’s call to engage in this ministry. And we hope and pray that this combination will become part of the essence of evangelical identity.

## Current State of Advocacy by Evangelicals: The Problems Defined

These are unpredictable times for evangelical engagement with the state. The global evangelical movement has grown robustly, allowing many evangelical

19. The evangelical movement has always been intentionally cross-denominational. It counts among its numbers Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Pentecostals of various stripes, to name just a few of its different groups. Denominational and confessional traditions approach public life in different ways; we briefly explain these and how they impact our argument in the following chapter.

20. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*.

21. National Association of Evangelicals, “Statement of Faith.”

22. Evangelical Alliance, “What Is an Evangelical?”

communities to become influential in their own national contexts. Political opening and the need for responsible action has followed, but evangelicals have responded erratically. In some countries they unite in support of dictators, while in other contexts they join in protests for greater democracy and freedom. Still other evangelicals, often in war-torn or oppressive societies, retreat from the public sphere, hoping to simply survive by staying below the political radar. Finally, there are opportunistic evangelicals; one Central American evangelical leader, for example, earned the nickname “Pastor Bribe.”<sup>23</sup> The type, nature, motivation, and strategy of public engagement in the global evangelical community are remarkably diverse, and growing more so every day.

The American evangelical community exhibits a similar cacophony of approaches both to public engagement and, more directly to our interests, to advocacy, even as the range of issues they have tackled has been quite limited. Many have fought enthusiastically for the “moral issues” of their time, seeking to influence policies on the Equal Rights Amendment, prayer in schools, abortion, and homosexual marriage, but they have not delved into other areas of public debate. Other evangelicals have pursued a different list of issues, including the persecution of Christians abroad, sex trafficking, hunger, education, the environment, and healthcare. A third group of US-based evangelicals has rejected any involvement in politics. They are also concerned that advocacy efforts find little to no basis in Scripture and are in any case often ineffective. They thus conclude that their energies and resources would be more God honoring if directed toward evangelism or other types of ministry.

Multiple issues undergird such dramatic differences within the evangelical community. Some we celebrate and some strike us as neutral realities, neither of which we dwell on in this book. The first is political diversity, which we celebrate. Evangelicals who live in different national contexts, who view life from different economic strata, and who have different racial and ethnic backgrounds are likely to have different political orientations and identify different needs. We believe the eclectic nature of the global body of Christ is a source of incredible energy and collective wisdom; we are grateful that the Spirit has moved in ways that have touched such a wide variety of people. The second issue is the organizational structure of evangelicalism. It is a cross-denominational and cross-confessional faith community. It exists with no central authority figure, and each congregation and even each individual has tremendous latitude to engage or advocate according to his or her own conscience. There are pros and cons to having a faith community organized in such a way, and the conversation about this issue is fascinating. It is not,

23. Freston, *Evangelical Christianity*.

however, the conversation that concerns us here. We simply accept this as part of the evangelical reality and acknowledge that it does impact how evangelicals go about doing advocacy.

A third issue driving evangelical approaches to public engagement strikes us as more problematic and is the one that motivates the writing of this book. We believe that evangelicals have not developed a sufficient theological and theoretical base in which to ground their advocacy efforts. This lack is likely the reason for the skepticism about advocacy initiatives that is often found in evangelical circles.

The absence of evangelical theology and theory about advocacy is felt in at least four different intellectual spheres. First, evangelicals in the West have inherited an uneasy dichotomy between private beliefs and public facts. They have relegated God to the former and left the realms of politics, economics, and technology deprived of theological input. Second, evangelicals have not sufficiently explored how power is used and abused in society and how this relates to the notion of “powers and principalities” in Scripture. Third, evangelicals are just beginning to articulate the nature of the state in society and of the scriptural call to engage it as one of these powers and principalities,<sup>24</sup> and have little to say about the activity of advocacy itself. Finally, evangelicals have dwelled too little on the inherent character of God as an advocate. This element of God’s character is revealed not only in the Scriptures but also in his creation of economic, political, social, and cultural systems, where he enables humanity to use power for good and to fight evil, thus working toward human flourishing and the restoration of creation.

The lack of reflection and academic rigor regarding advocacy has caused most evangelicals—those who practice advocacy and those who do not—to miss the proper relationship of faith to advocacy<sup>25</sup> and how the two are interconnected. We argue that advocacy’s proper place is within the process of discipleship. The essence of God’s character empowers humanity and makes clear that faithful discipleship includes engagement with the authorities by the body of Christ, especially when power is being used sinfully. We believe that engagement in advocacy is an issue of spiritual maturity, and that most of our leaders are not equipping congregations to respond faithfully to God’s calling of the church itself or of church members to engage in this area of ministry.

Although this book is a call to advocacy, it is not a call to do more of what currently passes as advocacy among some evangelical activists. We believe

24. See the next chapter for more details on what has been done so far along these lines.

25. This has led to what Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* describes as a political engagement that is largely nonreflective populism and moral activism.

evangelicals must be more diligent in integrating crucial elements of Christian character into the process of advocacy. Evangelicals too often fail to exhibit demonstrable love for their opponents in the public sphere and can even forget to care for those with and for whom they are advocating. Evangelicals have too often allowed their political objectives to become primary, which not only tarnishes their witness but also causes them to be ineffective<sup>26</sup> and, frankly, limits the ability of the Spirit to move through their works.

Further, many (especially American) evangelicals have restricted themselves to a particular set of issues without good scriptural reasons for doing so. A complex web of cultural, ideological, racial, economic, and political legacies—two of which are the fundamentalist/modernist split and our current societal polarization—has lured evangelicals into being champions of certain sets of issues. The Bible does justify involvement in many such issues; what is less clear is the justification for ignoring issues that stretch beyond these commitments. Evangelicals on both sides of America's bitter and polarized political divide have imposed a type of self-censorship on issues not deemed important to their group. Worse, some demean the causes and aspirations of their fellow evangelicals who happen to be in the other camp. Ideological orientations have thus kept evangelicals from a more biblical process of carefully considering issues from all sides, testing all ideas faithfully and prayerfully rather than rejecting them out of hand, and holding on to what is good (1 Thess. 5:19–21). We find ourselves, therefore, in agreement with Karl Barth's argument that Christians need to say "No" to all ideologies, so that they can say "Yes" to healthy political engagement.<sup>27</sup> When evangelicals are guided more by ideology of any kind than by Scripture, their witness to the world is muted.

To this point, evangelical involvement in advocacy has been a source of disappointment to some very prominent evangelical commentators. As evangelical insider Dallas Willard puts it: "The heart of the question before us is quite simple: Why after 25–30 years of evangelical political involvement, with a high level of visibility and influence, is there little or no improvement in the ethical quality of American political discourse and practice?"<sup>28</sup> David Wells, another evangelical, places the blame squarely at the feet of evangelicals themselves. He argues that "evangelical political engagement is actually less about politics and more about moral engagement. However, this engagement is quite impossible if the needed character is not there. Until this kind of moral excellence, this deep integrity, is the first thing that comes to mind whenever

26. See Hunter, *To Change the World*.

27. See Barth, *Community, State, and Church*.

28. Willard, "Failure of Evangelical," 74.

the word *evangelical* is heard, evangelical political involvement is not going to amount to more than it does now.”<sup>29</sup>

We agree with these authors, but argue that even their insights fall short of correcting the problem of poorly conceived and executed evangelical advocacy. *It would* be nice if evangelical advocacy had a positive effect and if evangelicals were seen as people of integrity. Yet we view three items missing from their analysis—and from contemporary evangelical advocacy—as equally or perhaps even more important: (1) a commitment to living and witnessing to the gospel as part and parcel of this ministry of political engagement and advocacy; (2) a willingness to let go of the idea of effectiveness and focus on faithfulness, leaving the results up to God; and (3) moving the role of the church as a body of believers to the center of advocacy efforts rather than putting individualistic or even parachurch efforts at the center as far as witness is concerned.

In the next chapter, we look at reasons that these problems exist in evangelical public action. This analysis will set the stage for both the theological and practical framework that we develop to attempt to overcome these drawbacks and set evangelical advocacy on a course that we think is more in keeping with what God would have us do, a course that we lay out in the last chapter. There we return to the three missing elements we have just outlined and suggest a way forward for evangelicals to embrace and undertake a truly transformational advocacy. But first we turn to a deeper analysis of how these problems came to be.

29. Wells, “Why Being Good Is So Political,” 27. See also Danforth: “If Christianity is supposed to be a ministry of reconciliation, but has become, instead, a divisive force in American political life, something is terribly wrong, and we should correct it.” Danforth, *Faith and Politics*, 14. See also Bandow: “Some politicians, many of whom claim to be Christians, friendly to the religious right and the evangelical left . . . have shown little of God’s love, instead exhibiting self-righteousness, callousness, and extreme partisanship. . . . Politics is often a rough and dirty game, but if Christians really have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, we need to act differently.” Bandow, *Beyond Good Intentions*, 229. Gregory Boyd, *Myth of a Christian Nation*, 11, gives another perspective on what is wrong, claiming that politics has become an idol for evangelicals: “I believe a significant segment of American evangelicalism is guilty of nationalistic and political idolatry.” He does not argue, as Grudem claims he does (*Politics according to the Bible*, 39–43), that evangelicals should withdraw from politics, but rather that “citizens of God need to take care to distinguish between their core faith and values on the one hand and the *particular way* they politically express their faith and values on the other” (*Myth of a Christian Nation*, 15; emphasis original).