

With this essay by [John Lee](#) the Institute continues a new series begun in September 2016 that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

A Camp Disturbingly Divided

The election and presidency of Donald J. Trump uncovered something uncomfortable for American evangelicals: a disturbing division between white evangelicals and non-white evangelicals. Soon after the presidential election, the Pew Research Center reported that 81% of white, born-again/evangelical Christians voted for Trump, while those in the “Protestant/other Christian” category (which includes white non-evangelicals) voted for Trump at a lower 58%. A more direct comparison among American evangelicals comes from a survey conducted prior to the presidential election by LifeWay Research. A month before the election, those surveyed were asked which candidate they plan to vote for. White evangelicals favored Trump (65%) over Clinton (10%). Non-white evangelicals (African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian-Americans) supported Clinton (62%) over Trump (15%). Instead of self-identification, LifeWay Research asked a set of questions to identify evangelicals. Questions about the Bible, the crucifixion of Jesus, salvation, and evangelism were used to distinguish evangelicals from non-evangelicals. Thus, the various evangelical groups listed above shared a common set of beliefs about some core theological questions, across ethnic and racial lines. *Yet*, the wide gap between those *for* and those *not for* Trump among American evangelicals is remarkable. What might this wide gap within the American evangelical electorate reveal about the character of American evangelicals?

My answer to this question is based on my experience as an evangelical who has moved within various evangelical schools and movements. From my conversations with fellow evangelicals (both white and non-white), my experience is far from being unique. And what I want to share is *disturbing*. The most disturbing aspect is not that Trump won the election with the support of so many white evangelicals. The most disturbing aspect is the *theological mindset* that animates so many white American evangelicals and those non-white American evangelicals who’ve bought into this mindset. As an evangelical, I speak as one who still loves this group and who still holds out hope for a more *biblically enlightened theological mindset* in the areas of justice and politics. I believe if American evangelicals got *more Bible into their thinking and less baptized American nativism* the better our Christian witness and better our collective lives as Americans, whatever our creed or color.

I’ve spoken of “more” and “less” – more Bible, less American nativism – but an additional metaphor might be helpful: center and margin. Putting these two metaphors together, we can say: American evangelicals would benefit from having more Bible in the center of their theological-political thinking and less American nativism, which ought to be pushed to the margins of irrelevance.

American nativism is not new. Perhaps the earliest expression of American nativism can be traced as far back as Benjamin Franklin who was initially suspicious of Germans in colonial Pennsylvania. And in 1798 the Federalist Party passed the Alien and Sedition Acts which extended the citizenship process to fourteen years to stymie the political influence of immigrants from France and Ireland. More well-known is the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic nativist movement in the 1840s and 1850s that gave rise to violent nativist riots in cities like New York City and Philadelphia. In the 1870s many Chinese workers were driven out of small towns in western states. In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first of many nativist acts, to limit the flow of Chinese immigrants. A long, sad, and painful history.

The latest permutation of American nativism includes strong anti-immigrant sentiment but also includes something new in American history: anti-Muslim attitudes and policies. Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric resonates with many white American evangelicals. Polls clearly support this. When

the first executive travel ban order was issued, the strongest support among religious groups came from white evangelicals, per the Pew Research Center. 76% of white evangelicals were in support of the travel ban, followed by 50% of white mainline folks; 10% of black Protestants; 50% of white Catholics; 14% of Hispanic and other minority Catholics. The Pew Research group also asked two follow up questions: How concerned are you about extremism in the name of Islam around the world these days? And, how concerned are you about extremism in the name of Islam in the U.S.? 75% of white evangelicals answered “very concerned” to the first question and 69% “very concerned” to the second question. The figures for white mainline Protestants were 59% and 48%, respectively. Other groups answered below these numbers.

Not asked in the survey but voiced by many white evangelical leaders is the concern that America has been experiencing a steady erosion of “Christian values” in our public life. This concern over the loss of Christian values is not hidden at all. From the 1980s to now, the political rallying cry among conservative Christians is the fear of America becoming a non- or anti-Christian nation. Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” for many white evangelicals was heard as, “Make America Christian (White) Again.” The long-standing enemies for conservative Christians were secular humanism (the ideological foe for Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority in the 1980s), abortion, and sexual immorality (as represented by Bill Clinton and the growing normalization of homosexuality). The new threat to Christian America began with the attacks of 9-11 but continued, in the minds of many white evangelicals, with implicit Muslim sympathies of Barack Hussein Obama. (To my embarrassment, I’ve heard more than once President Obama’s name said in just this way in public settings with the obvious pro-Muslim overtones.)

The other piece I’d advocate for in my discussion with my white evangelical brothers and sisters is *more Bible* in their theological-political thinking. The relevant biblical issues that are strangely missing among many white evangelicals are the issues of justice, hospitality, and concern for the vulnerable. One cannot read the Bible in any serious way without being aware of the importance of these issues, from the prophetic writings of the Old Testament to the gospels of the New Testament. And it is not as though these issues are alien to the American evangelical camp. Groups like Evangelicals for Social Action, led by Ron Sider, and Sojourners, led by Jim Wallis, have been around since the early 1970s calling attention to the biblical mandate for justice and advocating for policies that protect the most vulnerable amongst us in society. Both the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973), signed by over forty evangelical leaders including Carl Henry, Richard Mouw, John Perkins, Jim Wallis, and Ron Sider, and the Lausanne Covenant (1974), adopted by 2,300 evangelical leaders and participants from over 150 nations, articulated an unambiguous call to fight for justice for all peoples. From the Chicago Declaration: “... We acknowledge that God requires justice. But we have not proclaimed or demonstrated his justice to an unjust American society. Although the Lord calls us to defend the social and economic rights of the poor and oppressed, we have mostly remained silent. We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines. Further, we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system.... We acknowledge our Christian responsibilities of citizenship. Therefore, we must challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might – a proud trust that promotes a national pathology of war and violence which victimizes our neighbors at home and abroad. We must resist the temptation to make the nation

and its institutions objects of near-religious loyalty.” And from the Lausanne Covenant: “... Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.” These statements were more than mere high sounding statements at the time of their composition and ratification. Leaders gathered together, discussed together, and prayed together to examine with honesty and humility the weaknesses and failures of the evangelical movement. They called attention to the threat of materialism and state idolatry. They repented of neglecting issues of justice – social, economic, and racial. Perhaps more now than in earlier decades, we evangelicals, of all stripes, need to gather together for a time of reflection, prayer, and action, not only for the sake of our nation but for the sake of the soul of American evangelicalism.