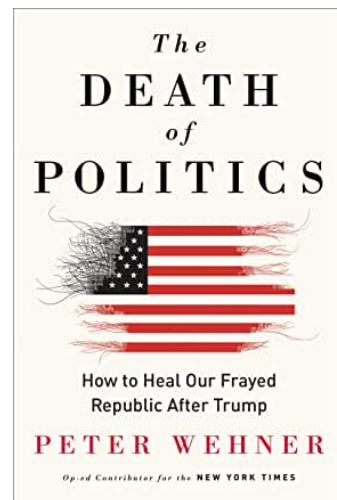


Peter Wehner, *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump* (New York: Harper, 2019).

If Trump didn't actually kill politics, Peter Wehner believes he's holding the smoking gun that did, and he's standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue. He has little good to say about the 45th President. Trump is "a foul-mouthed, non-church-attending former casino owner and reality television star who once endorsed partial-birth abortion and was convincingly accused of paying hush money to cover up an affair with a porn star, which took place after his third wife gave birth to their son" (62). Trump has desecrated the noble calling of politics. He holds "the most important and powerful political office in the world" but he is "intellectually, temperamentally, and morally unfit to be a mayor of a small city, let alone president of the United States" (2). "Trump is not simply a serial liar," writes Wehner; "he is attempting to murder the very idea of truth, which is even worse" (117).



Wehner believes we are living in a culture of contempt. He says, "many Americans have crossed over a threshold from frustration to despair, from unhappiness to rage, from deep skepticism to corrosive cynicism." They have "lost hope that we can solve our problems using the traditional means of politics" (11). But the reason for the politics of contempt is not that the president is a "huckster and a con man, a peddler of conspiracy theories and a compulsive liar, vindictive and erratic, and staggeringly ignorant of the key political issues of the day" (12). Wehner doesn't come out and give the real reason for today's political malaise, but I wish he had. It's not Trump. He has never wavered. Trump is Trump. He is amazingly consistent. What you see is what you get. It's not difficult to imagine a person like Trump, a power hungry, trash-talking egoist. What's difficult is to imagine evangelicals supporting him, thinking that somehow their future is tied to his success.

The real reason for today's political climate and culture of contempt is that many evangelical Christians turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to Donald J. Trump's character and voted for him anyways. They elected a big-mouth adulterous bully as their last best chance against the demise of Christendom. They opted for a Caesar-style intimidator to fight for them. They wanted more money in their 401Ks and turned to a tax-cheat and a crony capitalist to get it. They banked on a tycoon who used bankruptcy to stiff his creditors. They embraced a narcissistic demagogue's disinformation campaign and conspiracy

theories, and they did so in such a big way that they impugned the witness of the gospel. For that, we evangelicals need to repent. It is the only way to heal our frayed republic.

Christians in America, who take the Bible seriously and believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, embrace the Bible as their counter-cultural guide. The prophets and the apostles become their faithful and effective witness to gospel living. They no longer equate Christianity with civil religion and American exceptionalism. For them the kingdom of God has little to do with the American Dream. Biblical Christians are for the unborn, the refugee, the poor, and the sinner. We are for justice and righteousness. We proclaim an inclusive gospel with an exclusive truth claim. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. We seek to evangelize the lost. We believe in heaven and hell. We believe in gender differentiation, sexual purity, and in marital fidelity between a man and a woman. We are pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-immigrant, but not in a way that imposes our will on the culture. We work for the common good and charitable civility, but we cannot legislate the moral order of the Church in a pluralistic state.

We may suffer society's persecution but we cannot make society into our image. The New Testament epistle of First Peter is a straightforward guide for today's Christian living in a culture that is in many ways antithetical to the gospel. We are "resident aliens" and "chosen exiles" living for Christ in our home culture. For the Christian it is back to the future; it is back to the mind-set and costly commitment of the early church. We are for the world the way Christ was for the world.

We need leaders who will help us disentangle true biblical convictions from the strategies and behaviors of the world. Sadly many of our evangelical leaders sold their soul to Trump for a seat at the table of power, "something that in his life Jesus never did." Wehner adds, "But this ascent to power, has come at a devastating cost to evangelicalism's moral integrity and credibility, damage that might take generations to heal, if it ever does. To put the case bluntly, evangelicals and others were correct to say that religion should inform politics – but they let down their guard against politics corrupting religion" (62).

Evangelicals did much more than let down their guard. They capitulated to Trump's tempting offer of political power at the expense of moral integrity and truth. Apparently, the promise of pro-life conservative judges was worth the risk. In effect, Trump offered them a moral victory in the battle for Christendom if they would bow down and worship him.

A pro-gay, pro-abortion Clinton administration may have been just as bad, but evangelicals would not have been accused of siding with the Democratic “progressive” agenda. The witness of the gospel would not be riding on a political administration nor would it be in lock-step with a political party. Instead, evangelical leaders threw caution to the wind and gave their total support to a “fake Christian” who is also championed by white supremacists, the NRA, xenophobic nationalists, and climate change deniers. Trump has consistently cut back environmental efforts, pollution regulations, foreign aid, and human rights initiatives.

Peter Wehner doesn't go far enough in his critique. I don't think he realizes the radical division between the way of Christ and the way of the world. There is no going back to the civil religion of the 50s or the so-called moral majority or the religious right. The ideological divide is too great and the world-view shift too radical for Christians to find common ground in one political party when it comes to moral issues and social justice. We have to learn how to live for Christ in ways that are humble, loving, and courageous. The Church is not a lobbying effort; it is a radically called out community under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We will have to come to terms with the illusion of political importance and the strategies of the world. We have to learn how to read our Bibles all over again; the way the early church did. We have labored for too long debating a false binary: Republican vs. Democrat; Conservative vs. Liberal; the real binary is between Christ and the world. The choice is not between the left and the right, but between Jesus and Pilate. The culture is asking, as Pilate did, “What is truth?” and Jesus is declaring “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”