

DRAFT

For: *Ethics at Emory* 1(1) (1996): 41-43

The Virtues and Vices of a Christian Coalition:  
A Response to Dr. Ralph Reed

"The Role of Religion in the Renewal of America"

A Forum Sponsored by

The Center for Ethics and Public Policy in the Professions  
Emory University  
Atlanta, Georgia

February 13, 1996

John Witte, Jr.

Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed and I agree on three points -- as they were adumbrated in his remarks tonight, and elaborated in his most recent book *Politically Incorrect*.

First, I concur in his view that America today is beset by a profound political, social, and legal crisis of unprecedented dimensions. We may not be on the eve of Armageddon, as some of Dr. Reed's more provocative rhetoric suggests; such rhetoric might be better reserved for Chechnya, Rwanda, or Israel. But it is undeniable that, in America today, the abyss between city and country, ghetto and suburb, black and white, straight and gay, old and young, the monied and the maligned, the armed and their victims seems to be growing constantly deeper -- and graver.

Second, I agree with Dr. Reed that organized religions have been unduly marginalized and privatized in recent decades, and need to be restored to political participation and respectability. A healthy and stable democracy needs an open marketplace of ideas, in which all voices, visions, and values are heard and deliberated -- religious and non-religious, conservative and liberal alike. The recent rise of the Christian right in American politics should thus not be met with hyperbolic name-calling, glib talk of censorship, or habitual incantation of a mythical wall of separation between church and state. The rise of the Christian right should be met with the equally strong rise of the Christian left, of the Christian middle, and of other Jewish, Muslim, and non-religious groups who test and contest its premises, prescriptions, and policies. That is how a healthy democracy works. The real challenge of the Christian Coalition is not to the integrity of American politics but to the apathy of American religions. It is a challenge for peoples of all faiths and no faiths to take their place in the marketplace.

Third, I agree with Dr. Reed that Christianity and democracy, at one level, complement each other. In my view, Christianity provides democracy with a system of beliefs that integrates its concerns for

liberty and responsibility, individuality and community. Democracy provides Christianity with a system of government that balances its concerns for human dignity and depravity, social pluralism and progress. This complementarity has helped to bring Christianity and democracy together in the past, and it suggests provocative pathways of future interaction.

So far, by way of general agreement. Steve Tipton has offered a learned sociological critique of the Christian Coalition, which I endorse. Permit me, in an effort to open our discussion with Dr. Reed this evening, to offer a brief historical word of reflection on the Coalition.

As an historian of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, I am struck by how traditional the message of the Christian Coalition is. The core social diagnosis and the core political remedies offered by the Christian Coalition were not formulated by Jerry Falwell, Pat Roberston, and other co-workers in the 1970s and 1980s, nor by Dr. Reed and his co-workers in the 1990s. They were formulated four and half centuries ago by Martin Luther in Wittenberg and by John Calvin in Geneva.

The core social diagnosis proceeds thus: Today's society is beset by grave ills and evils. The principal sources of these ills and evils is that our religion is withered, our families are dissolving, our schools are barren, our neighborhoods are unsafe, our criminals are rampant, our marketplaces are corrupt, our charity too churlish. The core remedy offered by the Christian Coalition is equally traditional: We must revitalize religion, restore our families, shore up our schools, reclaim our neighborhoods, retribute the criminal, reform the marketplace, reward the charitable -- and all will be set right. Luther and Calvin offered this exact same analysis repeatedly in sermons, pamphlets, letters, and monographs from the 1520s to the 1550s. Dr. Reed and his Coalition colleagues are reading from ancient scripts and rescripts.

This Reformation pedigree of the Christian Coalition is doubtless a source of comfort for many. This is no upstart religious movement. The movement is rooted in nearly five centuries of Christian tradition that is well seasoned at political expression, adaptation, and expansion. This Reformation pedigree might well be a source of discomfort for others. For, despite its great religious and social goods, the Reformation also countenanced, and sometimes cultivated all manner of intolerance, chauvinism, slavery, religious warfare, and cultural suppression. Moreover, the solutions cultivated for the religiously and culturally homogeneous townships and territories of Reformation Europe might well not apply so readily to late twentieth century America, with its 260 million souls, 1,000 recognized faiths, and sundry other cultural and linguistic communities.

There are some instructive lessons in this comparison between the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century and the Coalition reformers of the twentieth century (if I may call them that). First, however much the Christian coalition may talk of its openness and toleration, it is fundamentally a conservative Protestant movement. This is not to commit slander; I am at heart a conservative Protestant myself. It is simply to say that this so-called "coalition" has innate boundaries to its message

and its membership. The movement cannot readily live up to its more exaggerated claims of inclusivity of Catholics, Orthodox, Adventists, Jews, and others without betraying its true character. When put into power, or pressed to make choices, it will invariably turn to its traditional roots, and restrictions.

Second, although Protestant in origin and character, the Christian Coalition has not offered a solid theological grounding to drive its reformation. The great strength of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation was that it proceeded directly and deliberately on the cardinal convictions of the Bible and of the Christian tradition. The political and social program of the Protestant Reformation was grounded in fundamental doctrines of total depravity, justification by faith, the priesthood of believers, Christian vocation, the image of God, the Ten Commandments, and numerous other basic doctrines and convictions. From these core theological beliefs, Protestant jurists and theologians drew profound and lasting implications for law, politics, and society. This social and political program was meticulously worked out in confessions, codes, canon laws, catechisms, and monographs, and changed only with careful, incremental, deliberated steps.

The Christian Coalition has no such firm theological mooring or methodology. The Coalition has produced, instead, brightly colored pamphlets and cleverly titled monographs long on provocative sound bytes but short on deep theological reflection. The Coalition's well-primed pumps of rhetoric are gushing with light talk of a political ecumenism and civil religion that features a common revulsion against secular culture, a common devotion to the nuclear family, a common belief in basic Christian virtues and values, a common celebration of pax Americana, a common protest against abortion and for school prayer -- all amply peppered with choice Bible verses, moral platitudes, and ingratiating stories and quotes selectively culled from American history texts.

This is woefully weak theology. If the Coalition wants to take on the name of Christ, it should also put on the whole theological armor of the Christian tradition. If the Coalition wants to adopt wholesale the social and political programs of its Protestant forebearers, it should also adapt their rigorous theological methodology. For without such a firm theological mooring and methodology, it is too easy to wrap the name "Christian" around whatever is politically expedient or fashionable, and to trumpet that as Christian truth. It is too easy to compromise cardinal Christian truths, or distinctive sectarian concerns, to fit political agendas. It is too easy to stigmatize, distort, or silence the radical and diverse voices of the Christian faith in the public square, lest the coalition be compromised. It is too easy to forget the lessons of the Tower of Babel, and to forgo the commandments of the Great Commission -- to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, educate the young, care for the poor and needy.

Finally, the Christian coalition takes far too uncritical and parochial a view of American democracy. One of the great hallmarks of the sixteenth century Protestant reformers was their ability to stand and to speak prophetically above and beyond, and when necessary for and against,

politics and law. In that posture, the Protestant reformers helped to drive some of the great democratic revolutions of the early modern age, in Europe and eventually also in North America. The twentieth century Coalition reformers, by contrast, have offered only a partial prophetic voice. There is much in the tradition of American democracy for them to celebrate, and much in current political practices to castigate. But the issues, demanding a prophetic Christian witness go beyond partisan historiography and politics.

Christianity must challenge democracy to reform itself. For all of its virtues, democracy is far from a perfect system, far from an "earthly form of heavenly government," as the more exuberant voices of the Coalition have said. Democracy -- in its American forms, and in its global forms -- is a human creation and inherently flawed. Democracy has stored up many idols in its short life -- the proud cults of progress and freedom, the blind beliefs of materialism and technologism, the desperate faiths of agnosticism and nihilism. Democracy has done much to encourage a vulgar industrialization that reduces both human beings and natural resources to fungible and expendable economic units. It has done much to impoverish the already poor, to marginalize the already marginal, to exploit the already exploited -- all along promising them a better life. Christianity must work to exorcise the idols of democracy, to drive democracy continually to purge and reform itself.

Democracy needs such opposition to survive. For democracy is an inherently relative system of ideas and institutions. It presupposes the existence of a body of beliefs and values that will constantly shape and reshape it, that will constantly challenge it to improve. Christianity is by no means the only belief system that can offer such a challenge to democracy. But with a long tradition of theological and political reflection at its disposal, Christianity cannot be silent.