

## Q & A



### **Hopeful Realism** *Evangelical Natural Law and Democratic Politics*

January 7, 2025 | \$26, 264 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0770-9

Natural law as a rich tradition of Christian thought has often been neglected by evangelicals. But in this time of deep polarization, this generous guide brings together robust natural law theory and practical cases for the evangelical concerned with bringing their theological commitments to bear on their political judgments.

## A Natural Law Framework for Evangelicals Today

**What led to your interest in natural law and evangelical politics and why is it relevant to our current political climate?**

**Jesse Covington, Bryan T. McGraw, and Micah Watson:** Evangelical politics in the U.S. is a mess. Practically, neither the moral reforms of the evangelical right nor the social activism of the evangelical left have delivered on their stated goals. While there has been some significant movement on abortion and criminal justice reform, to take two examples, those exceptions seem to prove the broader rule. More significantly, evangelicals' moral witness itself seems near a nadir. Churches have become politicized, riven by partisan and ideological disputes that are at times more central than theological or biblical claims. On the right, efforts to protect religious liberty have seemed too often self-serving, and many white evangelicals' embrace of Donald Trump—and, by implication, tolerance or even acceptance of his vulgarity, sexism, nationalism, and thinly-veiled racism—have undermined their claims to be motivated by moral considerations. On the left, progressive evangelicals' agendas have at times become indistinguishable from their partisan secular counterparts, leaving them open to accusations of uncritical party capture and moral relativism. In short, selective, inconsistent, and divisive approaches to politics leave evangelicals on both sides of the aisle open to critiques of incoherence, hypocrisy, and the pursuit of status and power more than moral convictions rooted in biblical and theological claims. The upshot is that our public witness has been seriously compromised and we have contributed significantly to the polarization and conflict currently roiling American politics. The sources of these failures (and others) are manifold, but certainly some of the blame can be attributed to evangelicals' deeper failure to develop and articulate a theologically rooted and practically effective understanding of the nature and purpose of politics. It is not that evangelicals don't have much to say about politics—quite the contrary, it is clear that we do—but rather that we lack a theologically grounded and workable political theory and suffer significantly for that lack. Absent a set of basic principles and a means to put those principles to work, it should be no surprise that evangelicals in the U.S. (and elsewhere) have too often tended toward moral grandstanding, deep inconsistency, and partisan capture.

**What is your main thesis in *Hopeful Realism* and what do you hope your book contributes to the current discourse on politics?**

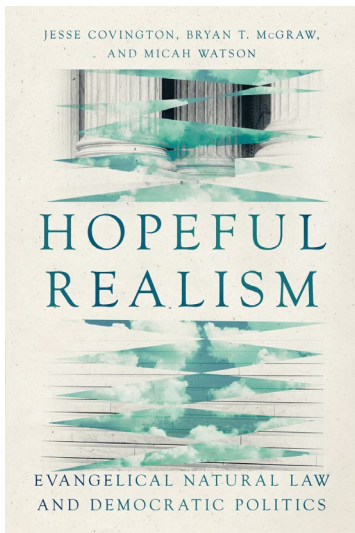
**Covington, McGraw, and Watson:** The argument of the book unfolds in two parts: First, we argue that natural law provides true and helpful guidance for faithful Christian political engagement, grounding politics in a substantive account of human flourishing. We articulate an understanding of natural law as rooted in traditional Protestant distinctives, especially working out of the witness of Scripture. Our emphasis on natural law, even for Protestants, is not novel, but our project articulating a framework for contemporary evangelicals is distinctive. In particular, we distinguish it from some extant alternatives in that it does not claim to be rooted simply in autonomous human reason. Ours is an inherently theological theory of natural law, grounded in a biblical account of the created order. Christians ought to ground their political reflections and actions in natural law because that is what Scripture teaches about Creation and human flourishing. Our theological framing elevates the natural law by recognizing God's authorship of our natures and provides a limiting context insofar as natural law does not exhaust God's role in communicating norms or acting in history to bring about his purposes. Finally, the theological framing contextualizes the varying perceptions of natural law in light of finitude and a range of ultimate allegiances.



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We then defend our view against those who would suggest that it is incompatible with a reasonably just democratic political order, explaining how it allows Christians both to remain true to their basic theological and moral commitments and to be reasonable, responsible participants in a democratic order characterized by deep difference. We maintain that a theologically grounded natural law politics is not overdetermined or paternalistic in ways that collapse plurality or oppose freedom, but rather provides theological and practical reasons to maintain plurality and liberty.

Finally, and this is perhaps the book's most distinctive feature, we explore how Christians can put this natural law theory to use in the context of particular contemporary political controversies. The goal here is not to say what a Christian view of economic policy, war, or civil rights must be but rather to illustrate how our theory of the natural law can help Christians sort through contentious and difficult political issues. Much like the just war tradition, we offer particular questions that can be used to interrogate political problems for purposes of moral illumination.

#### **Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?**

**Covington, McGraw, and Watson:** We wrote the book first and foremost for the church. We obviously hope that the book will be of interest to everyday churchgoers (its intended audience) but also expect it to be of interest to Christian scholars in the fields of political science, theology, and law, and useful for classes in Christian colleges, seminaries, and perhaps high schools.



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