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Book Review: Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat? by George G. Hunter III

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Ingram: Book Review: *Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat?* by George
“Do you want me to be polite or honest?”

“Diagnosis is more constructive than surprise.”

“Never overlook the power of the Holy Spirit, and do not neglect the doctrine of original sin.” “Normal and predictable behavior.”

“Mergers should rank no higher than twenty-eighth on any list of twenty-five options open to contemporary small congregations.”

“What is God calling you to do today that twenty years from now folks will say was smart and Holy Spirit led?”

2. A sample of a two-page monthly *The Parish Paper*.
3. An example of a Friar Tuck cartoon which was featured in many of his books and in *The Parish Paper*.
4. An illustrated chart from *Looking in the Mirror* of Schaller’s classification by church size and type. For example, a small fellowship tends to act like a cat (and thus may have nine lives).

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Who should read this book? Seminary students, pastors, and church leaders who do not want to spend hundreds of hours on unproductive tasks should read it. Schaller would concur that Jesus is still in the business of resurrecting persons and congregations. Jesus still creates new ventures out of “nothing.”

Hunter, George G., III. *Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006. 108 pp. \$13.00

Reviewed by William Ingram, Executive and Outreach Pastor at Journey of Faith Church in Manhattan Beach, California

George G. Hunter III is a well-known author in the area of evangelism and church growth. He has written ten books on this subject including *Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat?* He is the founding dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary where he serves as Distinguished Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, a title that was given to him in 2001 after eighteen years of faithful service.

At first glance this book seems outside the expertise of Hunter, as he is a scholar in the areas of church growth and evangelism, but as one reads this book, the goal of the book becomes clear. The purpose of this book is to encourage Christians to be engaged in all aspects of culture including the main two opposing political parties in order that believers may reach “pre-Christians” in both of these political parties with the good news of Jesus Christ. This is an important issue for Hunter, and his passion to reach the lost for Christ comes through in the book.

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“All of the people,” Hunter states, “who are politically involved (in either of the main political parties) matter to God, and all of the people who are affected by public policy matter to God; therefore, all people who are politically involved or affected ought to matter to all branches of Christ’s church” (3).

Hunter handles the possible divisiveness of the subject with grace and charm, discussing Christian ethic, the stewardship of the Christian message, the power of communication, and some straight talk about areas within both political parties that Evangelicals can and cannot support. His “platform” for reaching “pre-Christians” in both parties is classic Hunter, along the lines of *How to Reach Secular People*.

The American political landscape experienced a seismic shift during the 1980 presidential campaign. Evangelicals—both leaders and church attenders—discontinued “evangelical policy and strategy of bipartisan influence” (1) and threw their support behind one candidate, Ronald Reagan, who at best was a nominal Christian. The lack of bipartisan participation continues today where “more than 75 percent of professing ‘evangelical Christians’ now classify themselves as Republicans” (2). The seismic shift away from two-party participation to a single party identity and, for the most part, ideology, weakens evangelical Christianity by making it a mouthpiece for the Republican Party. This has not produced the kind of Christians who are transforming the world for Christ.

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Christians are called to be salt and light to the community and the world in which they live. Hunter points out that the evangelical church’s one-sided support of the Republican Party has not always promoted the greater good. Hunter states that except for five exceptions throughout the world, the “Evangelical Christian leaders are usually ‘progressive’ and active on most of the issues that matter to the people’s general welfare” (6). Unfortunately, since 1980, the United States of America is one of these exceptions.

A number of specific political issues are on the Democratic platform that evangelical Christians should support. They should care about: 1) the maintenance of the environment, 2) “oppressed people,” and 3) “world peace.” Hunter’s choice of these three items seems evident from his clearly-stated Democratic bent. Also his statement that “today, we no longer expect Republicans to even speak on the topic” (67) reveals his clear bias. He states, “Since, the Democratic Party is now more ecologically informed and serious, let’s support them on this cause—while calling Republicans out of their amnesia” (67). I think it would have been far more powerful if he had stayed away from the topic of global warming, which he believes to be a closed topic—fully supported by science—and rather stayed

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focused on conservation or stewardship of God's resources. By bringing global warming into the topic, he muddies the issue and comes across as far left of center.

A second issue that shows his Democratic bias is the issue of abortion. Hunter states, "I also side with many contemporary Republicans on the issue of abortion" (74). His two reasons for being pro-life, a term that he does not use for himself at least in this book, are 1) that the fetus has a right to life and 2) "that viable human life begins *much* earlier in a mother's womb than the crowd who regards abortion as merely another method of contraception has ever acknowledged" (74). He says that many pro-choice Democrats "believe that our society must provide other options (such as interim support, health insurance, day care, and adoption) for women who have experienced an unwanted pregnancy" (74). Hunter goes on to encourage those who want no abortions to work with those who want fewer abortions. If Republicans had "accepted some compromises" (75) during the Clinton presidency, more children would be alive today.

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His real bias is seen in the last paragraph of this section. Hunter challenges pro-life evangelical Christians to be more consistent in their pro-life views. Logically, those who are pro-life should "join the people who work (say) for serious gun control and a healthy creation, and we would oppose war and capital punishment, without apologizing for moral consistency (or rationalizing our way out of it.)" (75). I personally do not see how supporting serious gun control and being in favor of a healthy creation has anything to do with being pro-choice. The opposition to war is too large a topic to handle in this critique. Opposing capital punishment, however, is not synonymous with being pro-life, in my opinion, nor do I see this supported in Scripture. When I read this, I felt it was a clear bias of Hunter's and an extension of his Democratic leanings. In the Bible, it seems just the opposite; Scripture seems to teach that life is so sacred that the only response to the premeditated killing of an individual is death to the one who committed the murder. How far should this be taken? Some might argue if a woman has had an abortion she has committed premeditated murder and should die for her crime. In terms of capital punishment, the Bible indicates that killing the wrongdoer is the punishment for capital crime, i.e., taking someone else's life. The main point to not miss is that the Bible is pointing out how precious life is. The issues in regard to this topic could be discussed forever; the point is that Hunter's bias towards the Democratic agenda is clearly seen in the last paragraph of his discussion on abortion.

It appears that Hunter believes, and I might add rightly so, that many within the evangelical Christian community support the Republicans without question. He blames (for lack of a better term) the "social influences" for this phenomenon.

These social influences turn into a folk religion or what many scholars call the “American civil religion” (44). At the center of this civil religion is the belief or assumption that God is on the side of America and that it “was America’s manifest destiny to win the West, and to expand the United States’ influence, globally” (44). According to Hunter this civil religion has greater influence on American evangelicals than most are willing to admit. “It’s not that American evangelicals have no ethic, but it is astonishingly similar to the ethic of American folk religion; its themes are sometimes more derived from American cultural values than from the biblical revelation” (51). On this point Hunter hits the nail on the head. Evangelical Christianity has (unconsciously) moved away from the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice and has accepted a “later revelation that looked a whole lot like the contextualized ethic that Protestants had developed for the challenges of the nineteenth century frontier towns” (52). Hunter hopes that evangelical leaders will embrace the Biblical faith that is relevant “for every area of life and society” (52). Every church leader should hold this desire.

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Overall, I have mixed thoughts about recommending this book. For pastors, church leaders, and serious students of Scripture and culture, this book is a must read that will be of great benefit in helping people to understand the political climate of the United States. This book will cause some soul searching and maybe even raise some questions about certain ministries in the church.