

Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement

Ronald J. Sider

Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012 (249 pages)

In *Just Politics*, Ronald J. Sider offers an updated version of his 2008 work, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*. The book is Sider's response to what he sees as "contradiction, confusion, ineffectiveness, even biblical unfaithfulness" in evangelical political participation over the past three decades. His aim is to construct a biblically grounded approach and pave the way for wider evangelical consensus on political issues.

Sider begins his task with a helpful overview of historic Christian thinking on civic engagement. He includes key contributions from Roman Catholic social teaching and the Protestant Reformed tradition, along with Lutheran, Wesleyan, and Anabaptist perspectives. Another chapter elegantly covers how the nature of man, the reality of sin, and our eschatological hope should inform the way Christians approach politics.

The rest of the book is Sider's attempt to fashion a methodology that brings evangelicals up to the level of "systematic reflection on political life" that Catholics and mainline Protestants have enjoyed for decades: a worthy goal to be sure but one this book does not fulfill. In part, that is because Sider's framework does not offer anything comparable to the robust theological reflection behind Calvinist sphere sovereignty, Catholic natural law, or other classic paradigms.

Essentially the proposed methodology consists of (1) making a careful study of biblical norms, (2) gaining a broad knowledge of society, economics, and political history, (3) developing a political philosophy based on the first two steps, and (4) doing detailed analysis of specific issues. While the book offers useful background material, there is not anything original or particularly insightful about Sider's methodology. Evangelicals have already been using these organizing principles for some time, though some have done so with more intentionality and diligence than others. Still, Sider's framework is both sound and serviceable if properly applied.

If politically conservative Christians have a gripe with *Just Politics*, it will not be with the methodology but rather with Sider's application. The author wants Christian political philosophy to be driven by faithful interpretation of biblical principles (rather than the other way around) but whether he successfully accomplishes that is debatable. Although there is much in the book that theological and political conservatives can readily agree with, there are also legitimate points of contention at every step of Sider's application of his four-part methodology. A few examples focused on the first two steps of his methodology will serve to illustrate.

After expounding on the strong biblical command to assist the needy, Sider affirms the equally biblical qualification that "able-bodied people have a moral obligation to work and earn their own way." Nonetheless, in clear contradiction to 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Sider insists that even people who "irresponsibly choose" not to work still have a right to basic provisions supplied by others (including food and a level of healthcare "that the science, technology, and wealth of a given time can make available to all [society's]

members”). In the New Testament, even Christian widows had to have a history of good works and meet other guidelines before the church was to add them to the charity roll (1 Tim. 4:9–11). Sider’s emphasis on aiding the needy is proper and commendable. However, his rejection of the biblical restrictions on charity does more to hurt than to help people who might otherwise repent and live responsibly if only they had to reckon with the natural consequences of their sloth. Contrary to Sider, the Bible never commands subsidizing irresponsibility.

Furthermore, Sider is vague about how irresponsible persons should claim the rights that he demands for them. Can responsible people be counted on to willingly fund the folly of others? Probably not! The unspoken assertion is that government should take from the responsible in order to give to the irresponsible.

Sider’s interpretation also ignores the Bible’s insistence that family (including extended family) care for the needy among them before turning to others for assistance (1 Tim. 4:8, 11). It is not that Sider does not recognize the Bible’s call for familial responsibility; he specifically mentions it but soon moves to talk of “rights” that can only be enforced by a confiscatory state. This is representative of a troubling pattern whereby Sider clearly recognizes and acknowledges biblical standards but goes on to recommend a contrary policy that he presents as biblically faithful.

In his discussion of the biblical concept of justice, Sider gives a passing nod to commutative justice (fair commercial transactions) and procedural justice (rule of law and judicial fairness), but he spends most of the chapter trying to persuade the reader that economic redistribution is another crucial aspect of biblical justice. Distributive justice, as defined by Sider, is a “just division of money, health care, educational opportunities—in short, all the goods and services in society.” This is another area where Sider’s biblical exegesis appears to be unduly influenced by his political preferences, and his bias is evident to the careful reader.

Although the verses he uses to represent the content of commutative justice and procedural justice are entirely appropriate, the same cannot be said for the verses he chooses to justify distributive justice. The verses cited to bolster economic redistribution typically involve exploitation and oppression in the form of violence, property seizure, withheld wages, and other wrongdoing. Such offenses certainly offend commutative and procedural justice and call for restitution, but they do not belong in an argument for distributive justice.

Problems with Sider’s application of the second step of his methodology—gaining an understanding of society, economics, and political history—also abound. Incidentally, this second step was likely borne of a lesson he learned the hard way. In the first edition of the book that earned him a level of fame, Sider recommended a guaranteed national income, population control, and “just prices” determined by bureaucrats, among other socialist ideas. The book earned him many accolades from leftists but garnered sharp criticism from others for his ill-advised economic proposals. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union further undermined many of his proposals. In a 1997 *Christianity Today* interview, Sider allowed that he “didn’t know a great deal of economics” when he wrote *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* twenty years earlier.

Even though Sider's public policy positions have certainly moderated, it is evident that he still trusts government control over free markets in many instances. For example, Sider remains convinced that minimum wage laws are "necessary" even though empirical studies have demonstrated that they reduce employment levels, especially for low-skill, minority, and younger workers, many of whom are among the poor Sider wants to help.

Sider also insists that the science behind global warming "is now clear," despite revelations of data fraud and collusion among prominent scientists involved in the 2009 Climategate scandal. It is difficult not to question Sider's intellectual honesty when he will not even acknowledge that a legitimate controversy exists. It is easy, however, to see that allowing room for debate would seriously undermine his preferred policies. His creation-care recommendations include imposing a "heavy" carbon tax that would "double or triple" the price of gasoline, coal, and natural gas, and give more power to the United Nations (presumably including its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, whose members were key players in Climategate). Few evangelicals disagree with the proposition that humans are charged with wise stewardship of God's good creation, but many will suspect that Sider's recommendations have more to do with his commitment to modern liberalism than his commitment to biblical principles.

Those examples illustrate only a few of the many reasons why conservative evangelicals are likely to find Sider's methodological analysis of political issues disappointing, if not outright suspect. His express commitment to biblical authority may be utterly sincere, but ultimately Sider's guide to evangelical political philosophy feels more like proof texting than like a trustworthy roadmap for Christian political engagement.

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Work Matters: Lessons from Scripture

R. Paul Stevens

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The Theology of Work (TOW) and Business as Mission (BAM) movements are growing exponentially as Christians of all traditions reimagine the "apostolate of the laity" (Pope John Paul II) and the priesthood of all believers (Protestant streams). R. Paul Stevens is a seasoned leader in marketplace-workplace-ministry thinking, publishing several previous works and teaching at all levels on leadership and marketplace ministry. His new work is a creative and important contribution to a growing body of literature evaluating the biblical foundations for diverse Christian vocations.

Work Matters is a "quick romp" (in the words of Jeff Van Duzer's blurb) through the Bible, but it is not elementary or superficial. Work is understood to be much more than commerce or labor. Drawing on the Hebrew terms for work in Genesis 1, Stevens summarizes the prefall divine mandate of work as obedience to God and service before God and for the world. Work is extrinsically and intrinsically good. It is the entrance of