

The PAMPHLET

RELIGION & POLITICS

FROM GOSPEL TO GROUP

On the Conversion of Moral Practice into Political Machinery

By Silence Dogood

(who has seen this trick before, and does not mistake it for virtue)

OPENING STATEMENT

There are two reliable ways to undo a moral system. One may assault it openly, or one may preserve its name while quietly relieving it of obligation. History suggests the latter method is more efficient, more durable, and infinitely more respectable.

What follows considers the contemporary American use of the term “evangelical” as a case of semantic capture and structural decline. Once denoting a manner of life bound by the teachings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, the term now serves chiefly as a sign of political allegiance and group association, largely detached from those teachings.

This alteration is neither novel nor mysterious. It follows a pattern long observed: systems restrained by conduct, when enlarged and fastened to power, give way to systems restrained only by affiliation. Practice yields to posture. Discipline surrenders to alignment.

The name survives; the substance recedes.

This letter proposes no remedy. It marks the point at which remedies cease to apply.

I. WHAT THE NAME ONCE COST

There was a time when names bore weight.

To call oneself an evangelical was once to accept inconvenience as proof of sincerity.

The name bound its bearer to visible action:

Care for the poor,

Restraint of violence,

Humility before authority,

Mercy toward enemies.

One might fail in these duties, but one could not deny that they were binding.

Today the name circulates lightly and cheaply.

It is claimed without discipline, defended without coherence, and worn comfortably beside conduct that would once have disqualified its possessor.

The contradiction occasions no scandal.

It occasions indifference.

This is not advancement.

It is hollowing.

A word that once governed behavior now excuses it.

II. SEMANTIC CAPTURE

A term is captured when it ceases to describe conduct and begins instead to signal allegiance. Once captured, it regulates belonging rather than behavior.

Such terms display certain habits:

- They predict political alignment more reliably than moral conduct
- They tolerate contradiction without consequence
- They are defended as identities rather than examined as practices

By these measures,

“evangelical” no longer answers the question, “What do you practice?”

It answers only, “With whom do you stand?”

Those who dispute this may explain why fidelity to the teachings from which the name derives is optional, while deviation from factional loyalty is not.

III. SCALE AND SUBSTITUTION

Systems disciplined by action do not enlarge with ease. They require proximity, accountability, and cost. Systems disciplined by identity enlarge without friction. They require only declaration and defense.

When moral movements grow in number and seek influence over public affairs, substitution becomes probable.

Evangelicalism in the United States did not drift from its former obligations. It adopted a more convenient arrangement.

To maintain integrity through conduct proved burdensome. To maintain integrity through identity proved efficient. The exchange was accomplished without proclamation.

This was not mere corruption.

It was accommodation.

IV. POWER AND TEACHING

Modern state power rests upon hierarchy, enforcement, exclusion, and the credible use of coercion. The ethical instruction attributed to Jesus of Nazareth strains against each of these.

This is not dispute of doctrine. It is incongruity of design.

A body cannot demand love of enemies, renunciation of coercion, and elevation of humility while operating as an engine of political force without strain.

Something must yield.

In the present case, discipline yielded. The teachings were retained as language, softened into metaphor, and released from constraint.

The name endured.

The duties dissolved.

V. THE PARABLE

The parable of the Good Samaritan remains unsettling for one reason only: it refuses to treat identity as moral currency.

The righteous figure is an outsider. The authorized figures fail. Neither office, lineage, nor declared belief rescues them. Only action does.

Any structure dependent upon identity cannot comfortably sustain such a lesson. It must ignore it or domesticate it through repetition emptied of consequence.

That the story is cited often and practiced rarely is not homage. It is reduction.

VI. THE TRANSITION

A religion does not cease to be such because its adherents hold opinions, acquire property, or dispute interpretation. These are ancient features.

The boundary is crossed at a single moment:

WHEN DECLARED ALIGNMENT SUFFICES FOR MEMBERSHIP,
DISCIPLINE CEASES TO BEAR THE WEIGHT.

Before that moment:

- Conduct restrains identity
- Contradiction weakens legitimacy
- Membership entails cost

After that moment:

- Identity excuses conduct
- Contradiction is endured
- Membership grows inexpensive

This is not accusation. It is classification.

The form may remain.

The category does not.

Religion becomes group.

VII. TAX CLASSIFICATION

Tax exemption is granted not to belief but to category.

That category presumes:

- the body is not a political instrument
- legitimacy is checked by internal discipline
- identity alone does not confer standing

When a body operates chiefly as a politically legible association, classification grows uncertain.

This is not indictment.

It is misalignment.

A structure cannot operate as both a political identity group and an action-bound religious body without tension in its public designation.

If discipline no longer bears weight, exemption rests upon unsteady ground.

What follows from that tension is not pursued here.

VIII. THE TWO-CARD MONTY

There exists a familiar amusement in which a dealer places three cards upon a table, moves them with dexterity, and invites the crowd to guess which conceals the prize. It is called Three-Card Monty. The observant spectator soon learns that the contest is arranged;

the favorable card is seldom where it appears.

Consider now a variation.

Suppose the dealer lays out not three cards but two. Suppose he declares, with great solemnity, that these two exhaust the field of possibility. Suppose he assures the bystanders that liberty consists in selecting between them.

Such is the present condition of American political life.

The citizen is presented with the Democrat and the Republican. These two parties are set forth as the sole vessels of public authority.

Each warns of the other's ruin.

Each promises deliverance from its rival.

The language is urgent; the range is narrow.

The arrangement disciplines allegiance.

If the Democrat errs, his adherents are reminded of the Republican.

If the Republican offends, his supporters are cautioned against the Democrat.

Memory yields to fear. Principle yields to preservation. The voter who might once have withdrawn approval in reproach instead tightens his attachment, persuaded that the opposite faction would prove the greater misfortune.

This design requires no conspiracy of shadow. It requires only habit.

The two-party system does not abolish elections. It does not silence presses. It does not forbid assembly. It merely confines contest within two established houses.

Debate may rage; the boundaries remain.

Thus popular government does not perish. It narrows. Authority alternates custody between two enduring interests, each sustained in part by alarm.

This is not despotism.

It is confinement.

And confinement, when prolonged, is mistaken for nature.

Yet history counsels patience.

There have been seasons when parties deemed themselves permanent, when factions pronounced their rivals extinguished. Such assurances rarely survive a generation. Coalitions fracture. Alignments shift. Names fade. What appears fixed is often merely entrenched.

The American republic was not born of two houses alone, but of pamphlets, societies, quarrels, and experiments.

The present enclosure, however durable it seems, is no decree of Providence. It is an arrangement maintained by consent and custom.

The beginning of alteration is not fury. It is recognition.

A citizen who perceives the arrangement is less easily hurried and less easily frightened. He inquires not merely which card to choose, but why only two are displayed.

That inquiry unsettles the dealer.

And where inquiry endures, alteration is seldom remote.

IX. CLOSING

The present state of American evangelicalism is not grievous because individuals falter. Individuals have always faltered. It is grievous because faltering no longer affects standing.

A structure that does not require integrity cannot be mended by exhortation. A structure that has exchanged discipline for identity cannot be restored by appeal.

This letter proposes no reform.

It identifies the point beyond which reform loses meaning.

Those unsettled by this account may ask:

If identity suffices for belonging,
what remains of the thing being named?

Recognition is not remedy.

But it is commencement.

This work undertakes no repair of systems.

It declares when classifications no longer hold.

— Silence Dogood

Sovereign observer

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CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

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