

**Excerpt from *The Kingdom, The Power and the Glory*
by. Tim Alberta**

CHAP 16: KENNESAW, GEORGIA

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. —MATTHEW 6:24

Herschel Walker had a joke to tell.

It was about a man who suddenly dies and meets Saint Peter at the pearly gates, only to learn that due to some mix-up his soul had not been designated for either heaven or hell. Because of the unusual circumstance, Peter gives the man a chance to tour both places. They ride the elevator down to hell first. It's a giant party. The man, living it up with old friends, is reluctant to leave. Finally, he goes with Peter to see heaven, and while it's nice enough, he decides he'd rather spend eternity down south. But when the man descends back to hell, everything has changed. It's torturously hot. People are crying and screaming. "What happened?" the man asks aloud. "A couple hours ago there was a party."

"Satan shows up," Walker deadpanned, "and he says, 'A couple hours ago I was campaigning!'"

Everyone laughed. But this was no incidental comedic detour. The U.S. Senate race in Georgia had become the most-watched campaign in America, and not just because it was likely to determine control of Congress's upper chamber. The snowballing claims of personal scandal against Walker, the Republican nominee, had turned the contest into a made-for-Jerry-Springer spectacle. Walker's campaign had responded by bludgeoning his opponent, Democratic senator Raphael Warnock, stressing his church's history of threatening to evict tenants from a rental property and dredging up an unsubstantiated claim that he'd run over his ex-wife's foot with a car. That Warnock was a pastor—the pastor, in fact, of Ebenezer Baptist, the Atlanta church once led by Martin Luther King Jr.—lent an air of divine consequence to the campaign. As November 8 drew closer, each candidate accused the other, in so many words, of being a phony follower of Jesus. By the time Walker stepped to the podium on Election Day eve, he made it known that the next day's choice was not just between a Republican and a Democrat.

"The left is campaigning right now for you. They're campaigning. My God, Senator Warnock is campaigning," Walker said, referring back to his punch line. "They're trying to take you down in that elevator." The insinuation was hard to miss—even the conservative Washington Examiner ran a headline reading WALKER LIKENS WARNOCK TO 'SATAN' IN CONTENTIOUS GEORGIA SENATE RACE—but the Republican nominee left nothing to chance.

“I’m that warrior for God!” Walker declared. “He prepared me for this moment, because He knew I because He knew I was going to have to go up against that wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

The hundreds of people around me pressed shoulder to shoulder in the floodlight-bathed parking lot of the Governor’s Gun Club in exurban Atlanta, had signed up for just this sort of spiritual conflict. Every likening of Warnock to the devil stirred snarling cheers; every mention of his own dauntless persecution at the hands of the left inspired awestruck ovations. Walker was accustomed to being a hero—he’s won the Heisman Trophy as a punishing tailback at the University of Georgia—but this was a different sort of exaltation. He was more than a homecoming king; he was a crusader. Standing before a Bulldog-red tour bus that featured his smiling visage stamped over the word HERSCHEL, the Republican candidates pledged to stop Warnock from dragging the good people of Georgia down to hell with him. They danced and chanted and celebrated as though the election was already won. Maybe it was.

Republican looked to have momentum in the late stages of the campaign, and party officials were swelling with confidence about winning Georgia. This would be a triumph made all the sweeter by what Walker had endured. Though he denied allegations of having ever paid for an abortion, the pile of evidence in one particular case—including a personal check covering the cost of the procedure and a handwritten “get well” card, both synced to the date in question—left little doubt that he had. (“I thought we all knew this,” Erick Erickson, a conservative radio host in Georgia, tweeted in response to the Daily Beast bombshell that dropped one month before Election Day. Erickson added that “people do change over time.”)

That October surprise was most notable for what it didn’t do: change the trajectory of the race. The fallout from the abortion story—even the social media scolding from Walker’s own son, who had once been a visible supporter of his dad’s campaign—did little to sour the state’s conservative Christian voters on Walker. Even the revelation that Walker had allegedly pressured that same woman to have a second abortion—and a subsequent on-camera accusation, from another ex-girlfriend, that he’d paid for her procedure—didn’t hurt his candidacy. Why would it? What mattered was that Walker had an R next to his name. What mattered was power.

“*Winning is a virtue,*” Dana Loesch, a conservative Christian talk-show host, said on her program. “I don’t care if Herschel Walker paid to abort endangered baby eagles. I want control of the Senate.”

And so it came to pass in Georgia, the night before the election, that these hundreds of people gathered for a performative ritual of make-believe martyrdom. As Walker’s surrogates took turns at the microphone denouncing the character assassination of this good and decent man, the people in the crowd played along, booing and hissing and

feigning outrage, even as one after another admitted to me that they believed the charges against Walker were true.

“This is a tough business. The difference between football and politics is you don’t have a helmet. And there are no rules. You can cheat,” Lindsey Graham, the senator from South Carolina, said from the stage. “I’ve been in this business a long time. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody belittled, dehumanized, treated so poorly as my good friend Herschel Walker.”

Soon after, Gina Phillips, who had been applauding Graham’s impassioned defense of Walker’s integrity, stopped on the sidelines of the event to chat with a pastor named Raymond Porter. The minister, wearing a silver-and-burgundy clergyman’s robe, was there to protest Warnock’s pro-choice policies. Phillips worked at a pregnancy help clinic and was eager to compare notes with Porter. As I stood chatting with them, I was struck by the nonchalance of their shared observation about Walker: Of course he paid for those abortions as a private citizen, they agreed, but what counted moving forward was his opposition to abortion as a public official.

“I’d rather have Herschel Walker pay for an abortion, repent, get right with God about it, than elect Raphael Warnock who’d allow everyone to have unlimited abortions,” Phillips said.

There was one problem: Walker had not repented. At least, not publicly. The candidate had stubbornly denied the allegations, claiming an innocence that was utterly implausible and yet, somehow, totally acceptable. I asked Phillips if repentance is possible while clinging to a lie.

“He’s not telling us the truth. But I think he’s done the right thing with God,” Phillips replied.

If abortion is murder, as pro-life advocates like Phillips believe, then can someone who committed murder be forgiven without admitting to it? She shrugged at the question. I decided to simplify things. Doesn’t the public deserve to know whether a politician running on a specific promise has broken that promise in his own life?

“It doesn’t bother me,” she replied. “Because Raphael Warnock wants to let full-term babies be born and left on a table to die.”

Phillips was referring to Warnock’s vote—which he cast along with every other Democrat in the Senate, save for Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and Joe Manchin of West Virginia—against the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act. The bill would require health practitioners to provide medical care to any baby that survives an attempted abortion. This one vote did not occur in a vacuum: Much of the Democratic Party, which once emphasized that abortions should be “safe, legal, and rare,” had more recently come to support abortion

at any time, for any reason, a position well outside the mainstream. Both before and after the Dobbs ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, polling consistently showed that while most Americans support abortion rights, an overwhelming majority of them—across the ideological spectrum—also believe abortion should be illegal in the third trimester.

What made Warnock’s extremist position all the more notable was his training in the clergy. The son of a Pentecostal preacher, Warnock spoke eloquently, in Congress and on the campaign trail, about mankind being made in the image of God. He littered his speeches with references to scripture while advocating for human rights. In 2022, he told voters that he has “a profound reverence for life.” Given all that, one might assume that Warnock would break from his party on this issue. Yet he remained unapologetically pro-choice under any circumstance, stressing that the decision should be left between a woman, her doctor, and, if need be, her pastor. “Even God gave us a choice!” Warnock told voters at one rally, in a clip that quickly went viral. (Pressed during a debate to clarify what he meant, a flustered Warnock responded, “I think it’s self-explanatory,” which, theologically, it most certainly was not.)

Walker took plenty of pot shots at Warnock over his other positions, from supporting transgender rights to expanding the social safety net to condemning institutional racism in America. But it was Warnock’s abortion position that lent itself to Walker’s strategy of portraying the senator as Lucifer incarnate. As the campaign wore on, Walker went from challenging Warnock’s policy choices to questioning his legitimacy as a Christian. “He wants to throw these Bible verses out and say he’s doing a good job,” Walker sneered at the Election Day eve rally.

Warnock wasn’t the only one throwing Bible verses out. While making his closing argument that night, Walker alluded countless times to scripture, often in disjointed fashion. He said Warnock failed the country by not holding Biden responsible for the withdrawal from Afghanistan—the way God held Adam and Eve responsible for eating the forbidden fruit. He said Warnock failed his community by ignoring Matthew, twenty-five (“When I was hungry, you fed me . . .”) and threatening to evict those tenants. He said Warnock failed his Black church by preaching about racism instead of promoting America’s innate goodness. “God says, ‘Together we stand, divided we fall,’”

Walker declared. “Right now I’m not ready to fall!” (These and other arguments were continually punctuated with the now-familiar warning, “They’re trying to take you down that elevator!”)

That Walker was not always biblically literate made no difference to the crowd in Kennesaw. They were eating up every word. He had convinced them, no matter his own personal failings, that he was playing for the right team—politically and otherwise.

“We need those warriors [in] Washington,” Walker said, building to his rhetorical grand finale. “When I go up there, Jesus Christ is coming with me. He can block and I can run!”

With the pulsing lights and screaming crowd rousing memories of his athletic zenith, Walker shared what one of his offensive linemen used to tell him: “Herschel, follow me. I can take you to the promised land.”

The candidate extended his arms. “I’m going to tell all you: Vote for me, and I’ll help us to get to the promised land!”

As the music blasted and a throng of supporters circled around their hero for pictures and hugs and last-minute prayers, I glanced over at the entourage standing in the shadows of Walker’s tour bus. There were five of his confidants, applauding and shouting through cupped hands. One of them was doing nothing at all. He was just standing there, arms crossed, soaking it all in, a knowing smile spread across his face. It was Ralph Reed.

THE NEXT MORNING, OVER AN ELECTION DAY BREAKFAST IN THE STYLISH Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, Reed told me he had a feeling: This was Walker’s day. Unlike some who believed the race was too close to call—or others who predicted that neither Walker nor Warnock would clear the 50 percent mark needed to avoid a runoff under Georgia election law—Reed was bullish on Walker’s chances of winning outright. The Republican governor, Brian Kemp, was running away with his race and could have coattails down the ticket. Democrats nationally looked to be limping toward the finish line, playing defense over untamed inflation, rising crime, and lawlessness at the southern border. The history of midterm beatings taken by new presidents boded poorly for Joe Biden and his party.

And yet, Reed told me, what informed his outlook more than those political fundamentals was a gut feeling that the attempt to destroy Walker had failed. Not only that—it had helped him. Republicans who had been slow to embrace their party’s nominee, Reed said, had rallied around him in the wake of the allegations, sensing that this was yet another orchestrated attack on a virtuous Christian man. Hence the language of sacrificial suffering that became central to Walker’s cause down the homestretch: If Democrats were weaponizing the familiar trope of evangelical hypocrisy against him, it only made sense for Republicans to tap into the tried-and-true persecution complex of their base.

“The drubbing of evangelicals as hypocrites and frauds and phonies—candidates like Herschel, and voters who support candidates like Herschel—is unrelenting,” Reed told me. “I think people are honestly tired of that kind of politics. The politics of fear and smear, the politics of personal destruction, the politics of trying to tear people down and produce somebody out of thin air . . . It’s gutter politics. And it’s sometimes practiced by both sides, but it has become a wholly predictable and key part of the Democratic playbook.”

The fact is, Reed said—dutifully reminding me that he trained as a historian—that these ad hominem strikes have rarely been successful. Thomas Jefferson’s ownership of human

beings didn't prove relevant to most voters. Neither did Grover Cleveland's out-of-wedlock child. Coincidentally, one seeming exception came in the 1990s, when Republicans, led by Reed, capitalized on Bill Clinton's libido and persuaded the conservative churchgoing public that morality was a prerequisite for political leadership. "We care about the conduct of our leaders, and we will not rest until we have leaders of good moral character," Reed told a Christian Coalition gathering in 1998, according to a contemporaneous account in the *New York Times*. "The American people are hungry for that message."

But not as hungry as Reed hoped. Democrats won surprising victories in the 1998 midterms—right in the thick of the Monica Lewinsky scandal—and Clinton's popularity rebounded to historic highs. This was a hard lesson for Reed. Republicans had overplayed their hand, assuming that voters cared more about character than they actually did. By the time Trump came along, Reed said, voters were deaf to the acoustics of personal indignity. This explains why he bought into Trump's candidacy long before other evangelical leaders did: Reed had concluded that voters are far more forgiving than most political analysts give them credit for.

If Reed's performance in the aftermath of the Walker allegations came across as shameless—his emotional vouching for a "dear friend" he'd known for all of two years; his organizing of a "Prayer Warriors for Herschel" event at an Atlanta church that he barred reporters from attending; his comparison of Walker standing tall against these charges to Trump surviving the Access Hollywood tape—he didn't particularly care. Reed did what he had to do. His theories of primitive human nature, American political history, and the modern Republican Party were connected by a common thread. People, he said, are fundamentally self-interested. So was he.

"Voters are really pragmatic. There is nothing new about giving candidates the benefit of the doubt about past moral failings," he said, scooping a spoonful of berries and oatmeal. "And by the way, generally speaking, I'm happy about that." Reed broke into that inculpable grin. "Now, I'm more happy when that grace is extended to the candidate that I'm supporting."

It reminded me of the conversation I'd had with Pastor Robert Jeffress at First Baptist Dallas. Both he and Reed drew a similar narrative arc to make sense of Trump's relationship with the evangelical voter. But the two men seemed to diverge on one key point: Jeffress believed that evangelicals came to champion Trump not because they were full of grace, but because they were full of fear. The universal stench of scandal may have inured the evangelical mind, Jeffress told me, but it was the rejection of Christian values in the culture—the "under siege" mindset—that truly changed the game. I asked Reed if he thought this was a fair way to understand the appeal of both Trump and Walker.

Reed bristled at the notion that evangelicals were mobilized by fear (this, months after he told us in Nashville that his conference-goers were scared that the country might not survive much longer). Rather, Reed said, Christians were rebelling against their views being

treated as “inherently intolerant and undemocratic.” He recalled Barack Obama’s observation that some voters would cling to their guns or their religion as the nation changed around them; he assigned a spiritual subtext to Hillary Clinton’s comments about “deplorables” and “irredeemables.” In these cases and many others, Reed said, America’s political and cultural elite had gone out of their way to ostracize conservative Christians, treating their political calculations as illegitimate and inciting growing hostility against the evangelical Church.

“There’s no honest conversation anymore. They’re not saying, ‘I understand these are tough issues. You have to wrestle with your faith and your moral beliefs, and this is where you came down.’ No. It’s, ‘You’re a hypocrite. You’re a phony. You’re a fraud,’” Reed told me. “All those things are lies. And they’re not just lies; they’re slurs on the character of these people. Because it suggests that their movement is based on some reactionary fear, rather than an admirable, robust expression of their citizenship.”

Once upon a time, Reed might have been right in observing that Christianity was getting a raw deal from the culture. But not today. Just as with the unraveling of the Republican Party, the Church had been destabilized from within, its fringe infiltrating the mainstream in ways that warranted systemic criticism. There was a reason Christian views writ large were now summarily dismissed as “inherently intolerant and undemocratic.” For generations, white evangelicals had been overwhelmingly supportive of both immigrants and refugees entering the United States; by 2020 they were, far and away, the least likely of any religious subgroup to advocate for either one. And this was not some outlying development. In the year after Trump left office, polling repeatedly showed there was one demographic group most likely to believe that the election had been stolen, that vaccines were dangerous, that globalists were controlling the U.S. population, that liberal celebrities were feasting on the blood of infants, that resorting to violence might be necessary to save the country: white evangelicals.

None of this justified the sweeping censure of tens of millions of people. Having spent Trump’s presidency traveling the country, meeting religious voters in small towns and big cities alike, I knew how many serious, sane evangelicals were still out there. These people have no place in the left-wing fever dreams that inform cable news punditry and op-ed pages. They are reasonable and realistic, making prudential political judgments that often reflect something quite limited about their core values, their commitment to others, their complex set of religious convictions. They are dismayed by the hysteria and hyperbole that has captured their movement and want nothing more than to reclaim it. Their character deserves respect and the crackup of the evangelical Church is not their doing.

But Reed rejects this analysis. He scoffs at the suggestion of a self-inflicted crisis. In his narrative, evangelicals have been in the barrel since the courts banned prayer in public schools and legalized abortion and sanctioned the government to regulate religious institutions. This unfair and systematic shunning of evangelicals, Reed insists, is nothing

new. He's dedicated his career to fighting back against it. The only recent development, he told me, is that now he's got an army behind him.

"We've always been marginalized. We're marginalized today," Reed said. "The challenge was, could we ever change it? And we did. I mean, it took forty or fifty years. But we've changed it."

Changed *what*, exactly? The public's perception of evangelical Christianity is worse than at any point in recorded history. Church attendance is steadily eroding and will nosedive as Baby Boomers die off in greater numbers. Meanwhile, the rhetoric around their supposed persecution—Reed told Stephen Strang, on his podcast in 2019, that it would be "open season" on Christians if Trump lost reelection—hasn't been updated since the heyday of Jerry Falwell Sr. The only thing that seems changed, I observed to Reed, is disposition. Whereas the evangelical movement once downplayed its alliances with those who might undermine its moral credibility, today it openly champions the likes of Donald Trump and Herschel Walker.

Reed set his jaw. "I believe as a theological matter that someone can find redemption in Christ and become a new person," he replied. "And I believe that Herschel Walker is a new person."

Maybe he was. I didn't know the man's heart. If the allegations against Walker were true, then it would be consistent with scripture for him, as a new person who found redemption in Christ, to take responsibility for his actions, to admit his deceptions, to ask for the forgiveness that accompanies being a new person, and to radiate the transformative mercy he had been shown. But Walker wasn't doing any of that. Instead, he was asking for cheap grace. He was promoting a surface-level sanctification. He was using Christianity as a lowest common denominator—a way to gloss over the mistakes of his past, to explain his persecution at present, and to guarantee voters a political reward in the future.

I flashed back to Walker's defiant appearance at Reed's event in Nashville a few months earlier. "No weapon formed against me shall ever prosper," the candidate had said, quoting the prophet Isaiah, as reports swirled about the out-of-wedlock children he'd neglected to raise. Reed had looked smitten. Now, with the campaign in its final hours, I asked Reed: If Walker won, would it prove that Georgia voters really believed he was a new person? Or would it reveal that they care more about power than principle?

"I think what it shows is that people have rejected a really dirty gutter-level campaign of character assassination, and an attempt to destroy a good and decent human being," Reed answered. "And I think that what it says is that with few exceptions, elections tend to be about the economy and they tend to be a referendum on the policies of the party holding the White House with regard to the economy."

He paused for emphasis. “I think the Democrats and their allies tried to dodge that bullet by trying to run an alternative campaign of character assassination and personal destruction,” Reed said. “And it failed.”

NOT EXACTLY.

Walker failed to hit the 50 percent needed to win the Senate race outright, and so did Warnock, sending the election to a December runoff election. The signs were most ominous for the Republican candidate. Walker ran a full 5 points behind the top of the ticket, GOP governor Brian Kemp, and also lagged noticeably behind other Republicans on the ballot. The explanation was straightforward: Exit polling showed that for whatever concerns independent voters had about Warnock’s policies, they were even more concerned about Walker’s character and judgment. Despite framing his race as a proxy war between heaven and hell, Walker won a smaller share of white evangelical voters than did Kemp. He won a smaller share of pro-life voters than did Kemp. He won a smaller share of conservatives than did Kemp. These margins were small—a few points—but small margins made all the difference.

A month later, Walker lost the runoff to Warnock.

The Republican nominee delivered a gracious concession speech, pleading with his voters to “believe in America and continue to believe in the Constitution and believe in our elected officials most of all.” There were no foolish claims about voter fraud, no manufactured appeals to the Almighty. Just a divisive candidate going out on a unifying note. In truth, Walker looked relieved at the result. Whatever his faults, this man did not deserve to be used by powerful people to advance their agenda. All the tough-guy talk they coached into him—a fighter for Georgia, a warrior for God—couldn’t conceal the fact that he was unprepared, unstable, and fundamentally unfit for the office he was seeking.

“Don’t beat women, hold guns to peoples heads, fund abortions . . . leave your multiple minor children alone to chase more fame, lie, lie, lie, say stupid crap, and make a fool of your family,” Walker’s son, Christian, wrote on Twitter after the race was called. “And then maybe you can win a senate seat.”

In fairness to Walker, he was hardly the only Republican to come up short in 2022.

Defying the odds, the GOP laid an egg on Election Day. Republicans did recapture the House of Representatives by a thin margin. But they blew a chance to win back the Senate, lost key governor’s races, and forfeited control of several state legislative bodies. The analysis was elementary. In some of the nation’s most competitive states, Republicans had nominated radical candidates with views and rhetoric that scared away the moderates and independents who decide elections. Certainly, it was no coincidence that the prime examples of this—Walker included—were candidates who espoused some version of Christian nationalism.

In Pennsylvania, Republican Doug Mastriano—who prayed for Trump to “seize the power” before Joe Biden’s inauguration, and later launched his campaign for governor to the sound of a shofar blowing—did not get the biblical miracle he promised in Erie. He lost by 15 points, an impressive feat in a state where the last two presidential elections were decided by less than 2 points *combined*. And in Arizona, Kari Lake, the onetime Buddhist-curious television anchor who found religion in bashing any Republican apostate who doubted the saving power of Donald Trump, snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Though she faced a forgettable Democratic opponent—and claimed that God “chose” her to be governor—Lake suffered critical defections from moderate Republican voters in Maricopa County, the state’s largest voting jurisdiction, and lost the country’s tightest race.

She refused to concede. Insisting the election was rigged against her, Lake dialed up the religious fanaticism to rally her faithful. She spoke of praying to God, telling Him to “make this victory come whatever way you want,” even if that meant overcoming “the BS” that election officials were trying to pull. She joined a livestreamed prayer session pleading with heaven to overturn the results; one speaker asked God to “avenge us” against the Democrats. She told supporters that “the power of prayer” was leading to a successful legal effort to install her as governor, proclaiming: “We’re taking these bastards to trial!” A week after the election, Lake’s disciples performed a “Jericho march” around the Maricopa County elections office, believing that upon the seventh lap the deep-state deception would come tumbling down like those city walls of Old Testament lore. Despite these efforts—and half-baked lawsuits challenging the results—Lake’s loss was finalized, and her Democratic opponent was sworn into office.

NO MAN CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS.

Any politician who runs for office sensing a divine mandate soon confronts a bracing reality: Campaigns are built around the accumulation of money, power, and influence, currencies of a kingdom to which Christians do not belong. Dual citizenship is not a biblical option. When Jesus spoke of the metaphorical “two masters,” He explained, “Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Jesus concluded with the famous line: “You cannot serve both God and money.”

This quote has long been used to shame the extravagantly wealthy. But Christ’s message was more nuanced. Instead of *money*, the term used in most translations is *mammon*, from the Greek word *mamōnas*. Drawing from roots in Hebrew and Aramaic, *mamōnas* has historically been understood as referring not just to material wealth but to any entity that encourages greed, prestige, self-glorification. Some early Christian scholars, including Gregory of Nyssa, believed that Jesus meant “Mammon” as an alias for Satan himself. The reason politics are such a dangerous trap for Christians isn’t that they lead to devil worship per se, but that they tempt even the most disciplined believer to pursue that which inevitably distracts from—and comes into conflict with—their allegiance to God.

Matthew 6:24 isn't simply a rebuke to the Doug Mastrianos and Kari Lakes and Herschel Walkers of the world. The road to hell, as that old unsigned proverb cautions, is paved with good intentions.

Consider the pro-life cause. Millions of evangelicals identify as single-issue voters, having formed their political sentience around stopping what they see as the moral atrocity of killing unborn babies. After fighting for two generations to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, evangelicals heralded the *Dobbs* ruling in June 2022 as deific validation of the efforts put forth—and the compromises made—to end the scourge of abortion. Some went out of their way to mock Christian leaders who had preached any modicum of partisan restraint. William Wolfe, the ex-Trump administration official and avowed Christian nationalist, blasted Russell Moore, David French, and like-minded evangelicals who had opposed Trump's candidacy in 2016. "Will they admit they were wrong?" Wolfe tweeted.

But the ruling *didn't* end the scourge of abortion. The *Dobbs* case certainly changed the landscape of abortion policy in America, but not in the ways people like Wolfe had envisioned. Once a controlled and regulated medical issue, abortion became a wild-west patchwork of policies in the aftermath of *Dobbs*. Some red states rushed to ban the procedures entirely. But many more blue and purple states, now liberated from any overarching federal framework, pursued laws that made *Roe v. Wade* look conservative by comparison. On Election Day 2022, the citizens of six states voted on ballot measures that would shatter old precedents by dramatically increasing access to abortion. All six measures—including three in Republican-dominated states—ended in defeat for the pro-life side. The fifty-year campaign to overturn *Roe v. Wade* had succeeded, and the result was more abortions in America.

Winning elections does nothing to woo persuadable people. Confirming Supreme Court justices does nothing to convert skeptics. The evangelical movement's exercise of raw political power was doomed to fail even as it succeeded. According to Gallup, in early 2023, the number of Democrats who supported looser abortion laws had reached an all-time high. No surprise there. But that same poll also showed a historic number of *Republicans* supporting looser abortion laws. The trend line was devastating for the pro-life community: Republicans now supported liberalized abortion laws at rates higher than Democrats did just two decades earlier.

How could this have happened? One explanation is that too many evangelicals have taken the path of least resistance. Holding up signs is easy. Posting on Facebook is easy. Voting for a candidate is easy. But providing sustained support to babies and their mothers—by donating disposable income, by volunteering for long shifts at that clinic in a rough part of town, by considering adoption of a newborn with fetal alcohol syndrome—is much, much harder. Not every pro-life advocate has the capacity to do these things, of course, and that doesn't make their beliefs any less sincere. Plenty of pro-life advocates have done these things and will continue to do them. Yet none of those people—and I've known hundreds

of them—would argue that their efforts are anywhere close to the scale necessary to change the American public’s heart on this issue. None of them would pretend that the sum total of these grassroots efforts is remotely proportional to the raw political engagement surrounding abortion rights. It’s worth wondering how different this debate might look a half century later had millions of single-issue voters invested in something other than electoral politics as a solution to the problem of unwanted pregnancy.

There is nothing inherently wrong with legislative engagement. People of faith *should* advocate on moral grounds for the betterment of their fellow man. But politics are one tool to help construct a movement; politics are not the movement itself. Slavery would not have been abolished by bumper stickers and annual marches with hashtags. The struggle for civil rights was powered by people who were unrelenting in their on-the-ground activism, who toiled in the trenches without reward, who did dangerous and unpleasant work with humility and grace. These fights were waged block by block, city by city, to rally public consciousness to the cause. There were no shortcuts to legislating a more just society. More often than not, winning a political battle first requires winning the public argument.

The pro-life movement has not won the public argument—and, arguably, it hasn’t really tried. The message of abortion as a moral evil, as an affront to the loving God who made humanity in His own image, has proven curiously ineffective. Why?

For one thing, that message seems wildly inconsistent with the politics otherwise practiced by those who claim the “pro-life” mantle. If one is driven to electoral advocacy by the conviction that mankind bears the image of God, why stop at opposing abortion? What about the shunning of refugees? What about the forced separation of babies from their mothers? What about the hollowing out of programs that feed hungry kids? What about the lifelong incarceration of nonviolent offenders and the wrongful execution of the innocent? What about the Darwinist health-care system that prices out sick people and denies treatment to poor people and produces the developed world’s highest maternal mortality rate? What about the fact that, in 2020, guns had become the number one cause of death for children in the United States? Surely even the most devoted anti-abortion advocate could spot the problem when Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the former Trump press secretary who was running for governor of Arkansas, declared, “We will make sure that when a kid is in the womb, they’re as safe as they are in a classroom.” Indeed, America set another new record for school shootings in 2022, and the evangelical movement was silent.

The other problem with the pro-life message: *the messengers*. Can we really expect Americans to take lessons on virtue from a president who brags about grabbing women by their vaginas? Can we really expect voters to entertain the argument of unborn lives having inherent dignity coming from a man who lies about having ended unborn life himself? Evangelicals can rationalize all this—going on about “binary decisions” and “the lesser of two evils” until they convince themselves it’s true—but the unwillingness to demand and enforce a higher standard has sapped their arguments of moral urgency.

+There is no blanket answer to complex questions of making compromises for the greater good. Inevitably, some citizens will choose to form uncomfortable associations, like civil rights leaders did with a president who held retrograde racial views, Lyndon B. Johnson, in the name of passing the Voting Rights Act into law. But the unbelieving world must always know that earthly alliances are subordinate to eternal allegiance. This is the great failing of today's evangelical lobby. Instead of testifying confidently to the presence of a supreme and sovereign God—a celestial chess master rolling His eyes at our earthly checkerboard—Christian conservatives have acted like toddlers lost at the shopping mall, panicked and petrified, shouting the name of their father with such hysteria that his reputation is diminished in the eyes of every onlooker.

It's not just a lack of confidence that undermines the Christian witness, but a carelessness, a casual way of communicating the Lord's priorities. If a politician claims God's support, and that politician goes on to lose, can we blame unbelievers for concluding that God lost, too? And if God lost something as trivial as a political campaign, how can He possibly triumph over the grave?

This is the problem with politics as a substitute religion. Jesus commanded us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. *This* is the recipe for reaching the unchurched. *This* is the recipe for convicting the unconvicted. *This* is the recipe for effecting change—whether over abortion or sexual ethics or any other issue of importance.

Donald Trump promised a transactional relationship with evangelical voters: He would give them pro-life policies in exchange for their unconditional support. That transaction went through, but the receipt isn't pretty. Abortion rates spiked during his presidency. The celebration that accompanied toppling *Roe v. Wade* was short-lived. In 2022, for the first time in memory, *Democrats* were the single-issue voters when it came to abortion, turning out in historic numbers to support abortion rights. It proved to be decisive, swinging dozens of competitive races against the Republican Party. The only thing more predictable than this crushing defeat of the pro-life movement was its immediate scapegoating by Trump himself. "It wasn't my fault that the Republicans didn't live up to expectations in the midterms," the former president wrote on social media.

It was, Trump insisted, the "abortion issue."