that can embrace evangelical, covenantal, and sacramental conceptions of Christian community, and open
them out to welcome their non-Christian counterparts.

A truly conciliatory and inclusive Christian Coalition can surely aid us, distinctively churched and unchurched as
we actually are, to join in searching dialogue as well as
love with all the strangers who are our true biblical
neighbors and our fellow citizens. That is a public
prospect, I believe, worth striving for and praying for.

Notes

2. Ralph Reed, personal communication.
3. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E.
   372-390, 518-583.
   A18.

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A CHRISTIAN COALITION:
A RESPONSE TO DR. RALPH REED
"The Role of Religion in the Renewal of America"
(Public Policy Forum, February 13, 1996)
John Witte, Jr., J. Robitscher Professor of Law
Director, Law & Religion Program, Emory University

Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed and I agree on
three points — as they were adumbrated in his remarks
tonight, and elaborated in his most recent book
Politically Incorrect.

First, I concur in his view that America today is beset
by a profound political, social, and legal crisis of
unprecedented dimensions. We may not be on the eve
of Armageddon, as some of Dr. Reed’s more provocat-
tive rhetoric suggests; such rhetoric might be better
reserved for Chechenya, Rwanda, or Israel. But it is
undeniable that, in America today, the abyss between
city and country, ghetto and suburb, black and white,
straight and gay, old and young, the monied and the
maligned, the armed and their victims seems to be
growing constantly deeper — and graver.

Second, I agree with Dr. Reed that organized religions
have been unduly marginalized and privatized in
recent decades, and need to be restored to political
participation and respectability. A healthy and stable
democracy needs an open marketplace of ideas in
which all voices, visions, and values are heard and
deliberated — religious and non-religious, conserva-
tive and liberal alike. The recent rise of the Christian
right in American politics should thus not be met with
hyperbolic name-calling, glib talk of censorship, or
habitual incantation of a mythical wall of separation
between church and state. The rise of the Christian
right should be met with the equally strong rise of the
Christian left, of the Christian middle, and of other
Jewish, Muslim, and non-religious groups who test and
contest its premises, prescriptions, and policies. That is
how a healthy democracy works. The real challenge of
the Christian Coalition is not to the integrity of
American politics but to the apathy of American
religions. It is a challenge for peoples of all faiths and
no faiths to take their place in the marketplace.

Third, I agree with Dr. Reed that Christianity and
democracy, at one level, complement each other. In
my view, Christianity provides democracy with a
system of beliefs that integrates its concerns for liberty
and responsibility, individuality and community.
Democracy provides Christianity with a system of
government that balances its concerns for human
dignity and depravity, social pluralism and progress.
This complementarity has helped to bring Christianity
and democracy together in the past, and it suggests
provocative pathways of future interaction.

So far, by way of general agreement, Steve Tipton has
offered a learned sociological critique of the Christian
Coalition, which I endorse. Permit me, to offer a brief
historical word of reflection on the Coalition.

As an historian of the sixteenth century Protestant
Reformation, I am struck by
how traditional the message of
the Christian Coalition is.
The core social diagnosis and
the core political remedies
offered by the Christian
Coalition were not formulated
by Jerry Falwell, Pat
Roberston, and other co-
workers in the 1970s and
1980s, nor by Dr. Reed and his
coworkers in the 1990s. They were formulated four
and half centuries ago by Martin Luther in Wittenberg
and John Calvin in Geneva.

The core social diagnosis proceeds thus: Today's society
is beset by grave ills and evils. The principal sources of
these ills and evils is that our religion is withered, our
families are dissolving, our schools are barren, our
neighborhoods are unsafe, our criminals are rampant,
our marketplaces are corrupt, our charity too churlish.
The core remedy offered by the Christian Coalition is
equally traditional: We must revitalize religion, restore
our families, shore up our schools, reclaim our neigh-
borhoods, retribute the criminal, reform the marketplace,
reward the charitable — and all will be set right.
Luther and Calvin offered this exact same analysis
repeatedly in sermons, pamphlets, letters, and mono-
graphs from the 1520s to the 1550s. Dr. Reed and his
Coalition colleagues are reading from ancient scripts
and rescripts.

This Reformation pedigree of the Christian Coalition
is doubtless a source of comfort for many. This is no
upstart religious movement. The movement is rooted
in nearly five centuries of Christian tradition that is
well seasoned at political expression, adaptation, and
expansion. This Reformation pedigree might well be a
source of discomfort for others. For, despite its great
religious and social goods, the Reformation also
countenanced, and sometimes cultivated, all manner
of intolerance, chauvinism, slavery, religious warfare,
and cultural suppression. Moreover, the solutions
designed for the religiously and culturally homo-
geogeneous townships and territories of Reformation Europe
might well not apply so readily to late twentieth
century America, with its 260 million souls, 1,000
recognized faiths, and sundry other cultural and
linguistic communities.

There are some instructive lessons in this comparison
between the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth
century and the Coalition reformers of the twentieth
century (if I may call them that). First, however much
the Christian coalition may talk of its openness and
tolerant, it is fundamentally a conservative Protes-
tant movement. This is not
to commit slander; I am at heart a conservative
Protestant myself. It is simply to say that this so-called
“coalition” has innate boundaries to its message and its
membership. The movement cannot readily live up to
its more exaggerated claims of inclusivity of Catholics,
Orthodox, Jews, and others without betraying its true
character. When put into power, or pressed to make
choices, it will invariably turn to its traditional roots,
and restrictions.

Second, although Protestant in origin and character,
the Christian Coalition has not offered a solid theo-
logical grounding to drive its reformation. The great
strength of the sixteenth century Protestant Reforma-
tion was that it proceeded directly and deliberately on
the cardinal convictions of the Bible and of the
Christian tradition. The political and social program of
the Protestant Reformation was grounded in funda-
mental doctrines of total depravity, justification by
faith, the priesthood of believers, Christian vocation,
the image of God, the Ten Commandments, and
numerous other basic doctrines and convictions. From
these core theological beliefs, Protestant jurists and
theologians drew profound and lasting implications for
law, politics, and society. This social and political
program was meticulously worked out in confessions,
codes, canon laws, catechisms, and monographs, and
changed only with careful, incremental, deliberated
steps.

The Christian Coalition has no such firm theological mooring or methodology. The Coalition has produced, instead, brightly colored pamphlets and cleverly titled monographs long on provocative sound bytes but short on deep theological reflection. The Coalition’s well-primed pumps of rhetoric are gushing with light talk of a political ecumenism and civil religion that features a common revulsion against: secular culture, a common devotion to the nuclear family, a common belief in basic Christian virtues and values, a common celebration of pax Americana, a common protest against abortion and for school prayer — all amply peppered with choice Bible verses, moral platitudes, and ingratiating stories and quotes selectively culled from American history texts.

This is woefully weak theology. If the Coalition wants to take on the name of Christ, it should also put on the whole theological armor of the Christian tradition. If the Coalition wants to adopt wholesale the social and political programs of its Protestant forebears, it should also adapt their rigorous theological methodology. For without such a firm theological mooring and methodology, it is too easy to wrap the name “Christian” around whatever is politically expedient or fashionable, and to trumpet that as Christian truth. It is too easy to compromise cardinal Christian truths, or distinctive sectarian concerns, to fit political agendas. It is too easy to stigmatize, distort, or silence the radical and diverse voices of the Christian faith in the public square, lest the coalition be compromised. It is too easy to forget the lessons of the Tower of Babel, and to forget the commandments of the Great Commission — to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, educate the young, care for the poor and needy.

Finally, the Christian Coalition takes far too uncritical and parochial a view of American democracy. One of the great hallmarks of the sixteenth century Protestant reformers was their ability to stand and to speak prophetically above and beyond, and when necessary, for and against, politics and law. In that posture, the Protestant reformers helped to drive some of the great democratic revolutions of the early modern age, in Europe and eventually also in North America. The twentieth century Coalition reformers, by contrast, have offered only a partial prophetic voice. There is much in the tradition of American democracy for them to celebrate, and much in current political practices to castigate. But the issues, demanding a prophetic Christian witness go beyond partisan historiography and politics.

Christianity must challenge democracy to reform itself. For all of its virtues, democracy is far from a perfect system, far from an “earthly form of heavenly government,” as the more exuberant voices of the Coalition have said. Democracy — in its American forms, and in its global forms — is a human creation and inherently flawed. Democracy has stored up many idols in its short life — the proud cults of progress and freedom, the blind beliefs of materialism and technologism, the desperate faiths of agnosticism and nihilism. Democracy has done much to encourage a vulgar industrialization that reduces both human beings and natural resources to fungible and expendable economic units. It has done much to impoverish the already poor, to marginalize the already marginal, to exploit the already exploited — all along promising them a better life. Christianity must work to exorcise the idols of democracy, to drive democracy continually to purge and reform itself.

Democracy needs such opposition to survive. For democracy is an inherently relative system of ideas and institutions. It presupposes the existence of a body of beliefs and values that will constantly shape and reshape it, that will constantly challenge it to improve. Christianity is by no means the only belief system that can offer such a challenge to democracy. But with a long tradition of theological and political reflection at its disposal, Christianity cannot be silent.