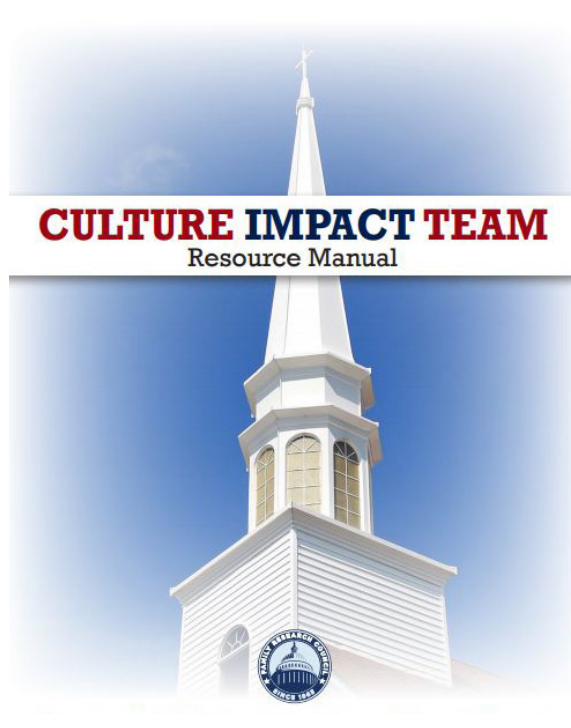


A Manual to Restore a Christian Nation That Never Was

In October 2017, I was perusing the exhibit area of the Values Voter Summit, the annual political conference of the Family Research Council (FRC), when I was buttonholed by John Méndez, national coordinator for the Christian Right giant's network of church-based political committees. As a white-haired White guy in a blazer, I must have seemed like a good prospect, because he wanted to know if I was interested in forming such a committee in my church.

He reached under the display table and pulled out a box containing copies of *Culture Impact Team Resource Manual*: a 200-page three-ring binder of instructions and resources for setting up such groups in local churches. He gave me two copies: one for my pastor, whose buy-in would be essential for organizing a Culture Impact Team, or "CIT." They were so bulky they barely fit in my conference tote bag. But I was glad I managed. Originally published in 2011, the manual—which includes, among other things, sample voter guides and instructions for church-based voter registration drives—has served as the primer for church-based, Christian Right political action for the past seven years. It certainly played a role in the 2016 elections, and will no doubt continue to be used for the foreseeable future.

While the manual has been promoted at other conferences and is available to download online, it's gathered little notice beyond the Christian Right. Nevertheless, it has been an important grassroots playbook and ideological manifesto, serving as both the contemporary blueprint for a central element of the infrastructure of today's Christian



The Culture Impact Team Resource Manual has served as the primer for church-based, Christian Right political action for the past seven years.

Right and an integrated historical and theological justifications for its political agenda.

After Donald Trump received 81 percent of the White evangelical vote in the 2016 presidential election, there was substantial polling and reporting on what issues concerned this demographic. But there was comparatively little reporting on the theological and historical justifications that underlie those issues and animate the movement more broadly. Similarly, there has not been much reporting on how the Christian Right has been organized, and how the church-based model encouraged by the manual may be playing a role.

But alongside this influence, the manual inadvertently reveals an underap-

preciated weakness. It illuminates the Christian Right's dynamic political theology but also shows how its theological justifications rest in part on false historical interpretations. These assumptions, which generally fall under the idea that America was founded as a Christian nation, have become commonplace in conservative evangelical culture, even as the anti-democratic ideology and distorted historical narrative in the manual expose a cracked and vulnerable foundation that can't support the movement forever.

THE MATURATION OF A MOVEMENT

FRC was founded in 1983 and soon became the political and policy arm of James Dobson's Focus on the Family. It later became independent, and under the leadership of Tony Perkins, has grown into Washington, D.C.'s premier Christian Right political organization. It serves as the national hub of some three-dozen state Family Policy Councils, most of which are also affiliated with Focus on the Family's current political offshoot, Family Policy Alliance. All also partner with the Christian Right legal network, Alliance Defending Freedom.¹ Taken together, they constitute the leading coalition of the evangelical wing of the Christian Right. FRC's Values Voter Summit has become Washington's most important Christian Right political conference, drawing major political figures, including, in 2017, President Donald Trump and then Alabama Republican Senate candidate Roy Moore. Since Trump's election, FRC has grown even more influential, becoming a guiding force in policy and personnel development in the administration. As

Perkins told the *New York Times* in 2017, “I’ve been to the White House I don’t know how many more times in the first six months this year than I was during the entire Bush administration.”²

Unsurprisingly, the administration is festooned with Christian Right figures, notably Vice President Mike Pence, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. All of these, along with other top administration officials, attend a weekly Bible study led by Christian nationalist pastor Ralph Drollinger. (An additional Drollinger-led Bible study is attended by many Members of Congress.)³ Cabinet members’ embrace of Christian nationalism has profound policy implications. DeVos, for example, has long viewed school privatization schemes as a way to “advance God’s kingdom,”⁴ and Trump’s education plan seeks to redirect billions of dollars in federal funds away from “failing government schools” towards private, including religious, schools.⁵

Trump has also rewarded this constituency in other ways. His appointment to the Supreme Court of Neal Gorsuch, an appellate court judge who sided with Hobby Lobby stores in the company’s historic suit against the contraception coverage mandate in the Affordable Care Act, delighted the Christian Right.⁶ They were similarly gratified when Trump issued an executive order on religious liberty, prompting Attorney General Sessions to draft religious liberty guidelines for all federal departments,⁷ allowing religious employers “to employ only persons whose beliefs and conduct are consistent with the employers’ religious precepts”—a dictate interpreted by many as allowing federal contractors to discriminate against LGBTQ people.

In a fundraising letter, FRC identified Trump’s executive order as its top accomplishment of 2017. But long before the Christian Right joined the top ranks of governmental power, it was reshaping itself, drawing on the lessons of the past in pursuit of permanent dominance in American public life. The manual epitomizes this, weaving detailed theological and historical justifications into a narrative in which today’s conservative evan-

gelicals are carrying forward the mission of both God and the leaders of the American Revolution. This grounding provides church CITs with the direction and know-how to build an effective grassroots infrastructure. The goal is to turn parishioners into voters, voters into activists, and activists into issue specialists and candidates who might implement godly principles in law.

CHURCH-BASED POLITICAL COMMITTEES

The CITs are the basic unit of the Family Policy Councils/Family Policy Alliance state political network. FRC claims to have nearly 5,000 such groups. While there is no independent confirmation of that number, nor of how active the groups are, FRC has dedicated a number of national staff to develop and maintain this network. FRC president Tony Perkins has gone so far as to declare, “Operating under the authority of the church’s leadership, CITs serve as the command center for a church’s efforts to engage the culture.”⁸

The job of CITs is to create and build upon extant church political committees, across denominational lines: with a Baptist focus but an ecumenical intent. In 2011, when the manual was released, FRC was reorganizing and refocusing their political base in the run-up to the 2012 election season and beyond, and CITs were the building blocks to make that possible.

The manual was compiled by Kenyn Cureton, FRC Vice President for Church Ministries and a former official of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation’s largest Protestant denomination. Cureton has been with FRC since 2006 and claims a network of 41,000 activist pastors, recruited under the rubric of Watchmen on the Wall, who are also encouraged to form CITs. In a training video, Cureton explains that once established, CITs work to inform, equip, alert, and mobilize church members on public policy and electoral engagement.

To that end, his manual includes sample voter guides—an updated version of voter engagement materials he’d originally developed with Richard Land of the SBC’s Ethics and Religious Liberty

Commission—as well as instructions for how churches should use them. The collaboration behind that project itself illustrates an evolution in Christian Right strategy, from externally organized partisan political development to building an ecumenical political program with a common message to be shared among different movement groups, and which is compatible with existing church thought and structure.

A more recent example of such collaboration occurred between FRC and the Texas-based Christian Right group Vision America. Together the two groups mapped the nature and level of engagement of individual congregations, with their permission and, notably, for their internal use. As Vision America’s John Graves and Rebecca Berry explained in a 2016 CIT training video, they partnered with individual churches’ CIT leaders to compare congregations’ membership lists against a database of registered voters. The national groups obtained data for voter mobilization, and the pastors and individual CITs received a portrait of their congregation’s political participation that could help them organize their church towards maximum political impact.

A 21ST CENTURY APPROACH

Many of the CIT tactics explained in the manual may seem like contemporary takes on old ideas, recalling the efforts of the Christian Coalition in the 1980s and ‘90s. Key to the Coalition’s method was obtaining and comparing church membership lists with voter registration and mailing lists of anti-abortion, gun rights, and other issue groups to create voter files for political and electoral development. In the 1990s, the Coalition built on an earlier concept called “in-pew voter registration” with events they called “Citizenship Sundays.” Today’s CITs stage an annual event of the same name, similarly aimed at voter registration.⁹ (In 2016, the event was held on September 18, shortly before registration for the November election closed.)

There are subtle but important differences in these approaches, though, that shed light on how the movement has grown. Since the decline of the Chris-

tian Coalition and other national groups with aging leaders, and especially since Barack Obama's election in 2008, the Christian Right has needed to reorganize, thanks to generational changes in leadership, institutionalization of a fractious but dynamic movement, and the typical adaptations that any social and political movement faces after losing a national election. This has partly meant revising, retooling, and updating the mechanics of their political operations. And the primary distinction between the old and new forms of organizing is where the movement thrust is coming from.

The Christian Coalition worked primarily *outside* of churches in its effort to mobilize conservative Christians into politics, sometimes alienating pastors and congregations with tactics like aggressively leafleting church parking lots with voter guides during Sunday services. The approach of today's Christian Right is to work primarily from *within*: the manual encourages individual churches to connect their resources with a greater public movement, in their own way, at their own pace. It's a method intended to have longer-term effects, as Christian Right activism becomes more of an organic part of local congregations' beliefs and actions that flow from them. A Facebook post by the South Dakota FRC affiliate, Family Heritage Alliance, epitomized this when promoting a seminar on CITs in November 2017: "The Culture Impact Team is indigenous to your church. Focusing on the local church allows us to be able to come along side you to be a source of information, equipping, alerting, and mobilizing you and your church as we engage our communities, state and nation."¹⁰

But even as FRC and its affiliates assure churches that they are in control, they see churches as a potent part of their political plans; the Family Heritage Alliance hoped to train its state's CITs to fight religious liberty issues as a 2018 priority.¹¹

Similar efforts are ongoing in other states. In 2012, FRC teamed up with their Ohio state political affiliate (Citizens for Community Values), the Alliance Defending Freedom, and Focus on the Family's political unit, then called CitizenLink

(now Family Policy Alliance), to organize six CIT training conferences to prepare for the 2012 election and in anticipation of a referendum on marriage equality in 2013.¹² In 2014, FRC organized a series of 12 rallies for pastors across North Carolina, partly with the intention of organizing CITs.¹³

In August 2015, a Baptist church in Louisiana hosted a "pastors luncheon" to promote the formation of new CITs in other congregations. The event featured as speakers Tony Perkins (who headed the state's FRC/Focus on the Family political affiliate before becoming the national FRC leader); then-Senator David Vitter (R-LA); and Mike Johnson,¹⁴ an attorney who'd be elected as a state representative that fall. Johnson's appearance at this catalytic event demonstrated another role that the CITs play: providing an electoral base—and arguably a launching pad—for aspiring Christian Right pols who go on to advance their agenda. Shortly after his election, Rep. Johnson proposed a bill titled the Marriage and Conscience Act, similar to Indiana's controversial 2015 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which would have made it easier for businesses to claim religious exemptions to anti-discrimination laws. The bill was tabled, but Johnson went on to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he serves on the House Judiciary Committee.

And on January 16, 2016—Religious Freedom Day—FRC hosted a national four-hour seminar called the Freedom to Believe Broadcast.¹⁵ Republican Presidential candidates Jeb Bush, Mike Huckabee, Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, Carly Fiorina, Rick Santorum and Donald Trump were slated to send video messages about their views on religious freedom.¹⁶ Speakers included FRC leaders as well as Ronnie Floyd, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. Some 160 churches hosted viewings and discussion groups in all 50 states.¹⁷ The announcement declared that churches should "Use this event to gather a group of believers interested in joining or forming a Culture Impact Ministry in your church."¹⁸

THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

All of this organization is in service of a seamless theological and pseudo-historical narrative, which both mobilizes lay conservative Christians and provides the framework for their political agenda. When the manual approvingly quotes Richard Land as saying that it is up to Christians to "restore once again to America a biblically based legal system that protects all human life from conception to natural death,"¹⁹ its author is appealing for the restoration of a Christian nation that never was—what historian Frank Lambert calls a "usable past" that justifies the politics of the present.²⁰

This usable past suggests a transcendent vision of a Christian nation, mandated by God and ordered by the Founding Fathers. It's a powerful appeal, yet one based on self-serving distortions of history. "On July 4, 1776 in Philadelphia," Curetton writes in the manual, "our Founding Fathers signed a document declaring our independence from the tyranny of those who would enslave the minds, the souls, the lives of men. But what many Americans don't realize is that with the same document, we not only declared our *independence* from Great Britain, we just as strongly declared our *dependence* upon Almighty God."

This argument is part of the manual's larger conflation of God and the intentions of the Founding Fathers, deployed to justify contemporary Christian Right views of what the Constitution requires on such matters as religious freedom and separation of church and state.

History doesn't bear out the argument that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. God, the Bible, and Christianity are nowhere mentioned in the Constitution. The sole reference to religion is in Article VI, which proscribes religious tests for public office, and thereby established a principle of religious equality that has, over time, similarly precluded religious tests for citizenship and voting, or for immigrants and refugees.

Because the story of the Constitution does not bear out their claims, Christian nationalists usually avoid talking about it and often rely on the Declaration of Inde-

pendence as proof that the country was founded as a Christian Nation, to be governed under biblical laws. They frequently conflate the religious references found in the Declaration with the intentions of the Framers of the Constitution. But in fact, the Framers' approach to matters of religion and government are not rooted in the Declaration of Independence.

The actual story of religious liberty in the U.S. is rooted not in the Declaration's appeals to God, but in other work of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. After serving as the principal author of the Declaration in 1776, within a year of his returning to Virginia, Jefferson wrote and introduced in the state legislature what eventually became the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The point was to promote religious equality under the law, such that citizens may believe as they will and that this "shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."²¹ As historians Edwin S. Gausstad and Leigh E. Schmidt wrote in their classic, *The Religious History of America*, the development of religious freedom in Virginia "determined the course that the nation itself chose to follow."²² Yet there is nothing in the Virginia Statute holding a special place for Christianity or that otherwise supports Cureton's claims.²³

Nevertheless, the fundamentals of Christian nationalist ideology are part of what FRC wants its grassroots activists to build upon. And the failure of most of the rest of society to engage with this body of misinformation has effectively ceded the public debate, treating these distortions as esoteric matters best left to the academy and the most persistent advocates of separation of church and state.

History is powerful. That's why it is important for the rest of us not just to know how the Religious Right is wrong, but also that the Framers of the Constitution intended to inoculate the country against the ravages of religious supremacism.

DOMINIONISM AND THE CULTURE MANDATE

Other key texts in the manual refer to the "cultural mandate" or the "cultural commission"—terms that in other contexts are used interchangeably with the "dominion mandate." This idea de-

rives from the biblical book of Genesis, in which God declares that man shall "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." Over the past half-century, the phrase has become the watchword for the religious vision of Dominionists, who believe that, regardless of means, timetable, or theological camp, God has called conservative Christians to exercise dominion over society by taking control of political and cultural institutions.²⁴

The implications of these terms, considered the foundation for a "biblical worldview" (used interchangeably with a "Christian Worldview"), and the activities related to attaining Christian domination over every area of life are discussed in the manual. This frank theocratic language is remarkable in itself since so much of what we hear is couched in vaguer terms like "family values" and "values voter." Cureton's essays in the manual, by contrast, epitomize contemporary Dominionism, as when he writes:

This God-given responsibility and authority to have dominion is all inclusive. As vice-regents of God, we are to bring His sovereign rule (i.e., His Kingdom) to bear on every sphere of our world, not just the sacred, but also the secular. God's dominion is to hold sway over all human endeavors and institutes, such as religious practice, ethics, education, government, science, medicine, the arts, the environments, entertainment, etc.²⁵

The manual's worldview was given voice at the 2017 Values Voter Summit, where plenary speaker Dr. Frank Wright, CEO of the D. James Kennedy Center for Christian Statesmanship in Washington, D.C., explained the biblical justification for political action. "[T]he Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate together comprise the ethic of Christian cultural engagement," Wright declared. He emphasized that God is sovereign over all of the institutions of culture, "including and maybe especially government and politics."²⁶ Wright's Center for Christian Statesmanship seeks to train members of Congress and staff in this approach to government and governing.

WRONG ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Writing in the manual, Cureton equates religious liberty solely with advancing the mission of conservative evangelical Christianity, especially on abortion, sexuality, gender, and marriage. As Cureton sees it, religious freedom amounts to this: "God has given every human being the basic freedom of being able to relate to and worship Him both privately and publicly, a freedom which is enshrined in our First Amendment."²⁷ No mention is made of the religious freedom of others.

Such a narrow and self-serving claim relies on a shaky foundation not supported by history. A focus of this revisionist campaign is a long-term siege against Thomas Jefferson's famous phrase, "wall of separation between church and state," and related constitutional principles. Historian John Ragosta writes that prior to the modern notion of Christian nationalism, the idea of separation of church and state was little questioned. It had been central to Supreme Court jurisprudence since 1879.²⁸

In keeping with this siege on the metaphorical wall, Cureton grossly distorts the idea of church-state separation, its history and the motives of its defenders. The distortions involve the claim that religion generally and Christianity in particular need protection from the alleged creeping tyranny of the secular state. Unfortunately, these and other such claims have not been contested as widely as befits their central role in the religious and political identity of members of the Christian Right.

In 1802, President Jefferson wrote to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, to assure this religious minority of his support for religious freedom. At the time, Connecticut had yet to disestablish the Congregational Church, and Baptists were effectively second-class citizens. Jefferson promised them, in a letter vetted by his Attorney General, that they could be so assured because the First Amendment had erected a wall of separation between church and state.

But Cureton claims, in one of several essays in the manual, that the "true meaning of Jefferson's 'wall'" is that he intended it as "a protection of people of faith from government intrusion."²⁹

This echoes a long-debunked notion that the metaphor was intended as a “one-directional wall” to protect religion from government, when in fact the purpose was for the protection of both from one another.³⁰ Cureton is evidently aware of this, complaining that the Supreme Court has “ignored the original intent of the Founding Fathers” and “trashed four centuries of America’s Judeo-Christian heritage” in “declaring a two-way ‘Wall of Separation’ between church and state.”³¹

Unsurprisingly, Cureton therefore claims that the so-called “culture war” is a war against both Christian beliefs and against “our nation’s Christian heritage.”³² He questions the patriotism of anyone who holds different views. “Nobody,” he concludes, “ought to claim to be a good citizen, a patriot who takes Christianity out of culture, God out of government.”³³

This dualistic framing pits the people of God against a secular government whose actual purpose is to protect the rights of all. Indeed, Cureton claims that defenders of church-state separation are trying to silence Christians who speak out about the issues of the day:

[H]ave you noticed how the critics cry foul, claiming “Separation of Church & State,” and saying “You don’t have a right to speak about public policy and law! Go cower in your church, lock yourself in your little stained glass prison, and stay there!”³⁴

Of course, few if any ever say such things. And consistent with Cureton’s method, he cites no examples of anyone who ever has.

THE VIRTUAL REALITY OF “CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW GLASSES”

Cureton and his ilk believe that there are three areas of God-ordained governance: civil government, the family, and the church.³⁵ And while he insists that the godly institution of civil government must be obeyed, he also says that when it strays out of conformity with God’s laws, it is incumbent on Christians to resist. How far this resistance should go is the question.

The influential evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer’s 1981 book, *A Christian Manifesto*, served as a catalyst

for the evangelical antiabortion movement, the broader Christian Right, and the creeping theocratization of the Republican Party.³⁶ Cureton cites the book in denouncing an apolitical stance on the part of some conservative Christians as “unbiblical,” declaring that, “it is in fact a heresy, a doctrine of demons.” The answer, Cureton asserts, is “to recover a biblically based worldview that rightly places all of life under the rule of God.”³⁷

While Schaeffer claimed to support religious pluralism and to oppose theocracy, his work inspired the political activism of many who later became full-fledged Dominionists. Although he didn’t share the belief, held by Christian Reconstructionist followers of theologian R.J. Rushdoony, that society should eventually be reorganized according to Old Testament biblical laws, he nonetheless warned of a profound threat to contemporary Christianity by secular government, and called for massive resistance.

Cureton, like many others, follows in Schaeffer’s harsh rhetorical wake, calling judges “black robed tyrants” who are engaged in “radical secularization” of the public square, promoting homosexuality, which he calls a “deceptive perversion,” and attacking the “sacred institution of marriage.”³⁸

Cureton’s manual thus casts the ordinary struggles of public life in terms of religious war. And in so doing, it does not just idly employ military and apocalyptic rhetoric the way some people speak of politics as a horse race. Rather, the meaning is more literal, as he states, “we are soldiers on a battlefield of a much grander scale fighting in a War that has been waged since the beginning of time with an enemy that desperately seeks to stop God’s kingdom from coming...”³⁹

“It is only when you put on your ‘Christian worldview glasses,’” Cureton declares, “that you can see the current culture war for what it really is.”⁴⁰

Following this, Cureton denounces the idea of religious tolerance, and anything other than a “black and white” view of good and evil, as a “subtle, sinister brainwashing process” that seeks “peaceful co-existence with evil.”⁴¹ Therefore, he concludes, sometimes, “we must stand up to our government...if the government

commands what God condemns, then you are obliged to disobey.”⁴²

Justifying what he calls the “last resort” of Christian civil disobedience, he attributes a quote to George Washington: “Government... is a troublesome servant and a fearful Master.”⁴³ Tellingly, it’s a line taken from a larger statement that the Washington Library at Mt. Vernon has debunked as “spurious.”⁴⁴

THE MANUAL FOR THEOCRATIC DOMINION

The religious vision of the manual—of conservative Christians laboring toward political dominion—and the many Christian Right catchphrases it deploys, are familiar to anyone engaged in public life. Many of its false historical claims are also familiar. Taken together they provide a clear snapshot of the ideological presumptions of the Christian Right and merit careful study as well as the development of thoughtful responses.

Culture Impact Teams serve as the ground troops of a formidable political army, now waging its war from the center of politics and government, where they’ve been empowered to advance a dangerous suite of theocratic and persecutory policies. What’s often lost amid the consternation over Trump’s support among White evangelicals, is that it they are not just a mystifying demographic, but a politically well-organized one as well. When people refer to “the base,” they are an important element; when they refer to the infrastructure of the Christian Right, CITs are part of the foundation. And when we say that the Christian Right is promoting theocratic Dominionism, FRC’s manual is Exhibit A in demonstrating how this ideology is shaping national policy, as well as the Christian Right’s plan to continue building their base into the future. ☹

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