

Living in Tension as a Libertarian Christian

A “libertarian Christian” might seem like an oxymoron to some Christians.

For Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, you [cannot be both a faithful Christian and a libertarian](#). For him, libertarianism is defined only by exaltation of the ego, freedom from all moral restraints, and secular humanism—ideals that are hardly in line with a God-centric faith. The left-leaning Christian political activist Jim Wallis [would agree](#). For Wallis, libertarian political philosophy does not line up with what the Bible says about government authority, and the libertarian’s strong emphasis on individual rights can violate the common good, leaving the poor to fend for themselves.

When I told my conservative Christian parents my political perspective was inching ever closer to libertarianism, they looked at me like they expected me to start defending drug use and prostitution. (I didn’t.)

Finding my way from neo-conservatism to libertarianism didn’t come without many intellectual tensions along the way. Not realizing its niche status, Ayn Rand’s famous atheism and moral philosophy of Objectivism was nearly enough to scare me away from libertarian thought entirely. But the more I explored, the more I found consistency between political liberty and my faith. I also met many other libertarian Christians who were wrestling with the same ideas.

Locating the Tension

One of them, Jacqueline Isaacs, spoke at [Acton on Tap](#) last August about [Called to Freedom: Why You Can Be Christian and](#)

[Libertarian](#), the book we co-authored together with four of our peers, Isaacs explained why she believes it's possible to reconcile Christianity and libertarianism, but zeroed in on why life as a libertarian Christian is not possible without experiencing tension in its many forms—an uncomfortable reality she and I have both learned to accept.

Adhering to the non-aggression principle, which condemns the initiation of force against other persons or property, is what separates most libertarians from free-market conservatives. Libertarian political thought brings into question the traditional conservative tendency to regulate moral issues, such as outlawing casinos or regulating alcohol consumption through strict licensing laws and high taxes.

Unsurprisingly, one protest we often hear from conservative Christians goes something like this: “But I don't want my children to grow up in a society where X is acceptable.” Fill in the blank with gambling, smoking marijuana, gay marriage, or any choice that might be considered immoral or controversial in the context of Christian teaching. What the conservative Christian tends not to realize is that the libertarian Christian doesn't want this kind of world either – a world where virtue and vice are blurred. Enter: the tension.

How can the libertarian Christian want to live in a virtuous society, but also a *free* society that allows others to choose good or to choose evil, so long as they are not harming someone else? The libertarian Christian takes this question and considers which institutional sphere of influence is best suited for the job of “morality influencer”: the government, the free market, or the church.

Libertine Libertarianism vs. Christian Libertarianism

While a libertine libertarian, or someone who is not

necessarily concerned with objective morality, might say, “leave it to the market to decide,” the libertarian Christian isn’t satisfied with that answer.

Her libertarian side would argue that the government is not an effective enforcer of morality—and when it tries to be, the cost is great. History shows that Prohibition never stopped speakeasies or bootleggers. America kept on drinking, even as organized crime spiked. Even the Congressmen and Senators who voted to pass the amendment purchased booze from their own personal bootlegger, [George Cassidy](#). Similarly, the war on drugs has yielded the world’s highest incarceration rate with a price tag of about [\\$1 trillion](#) to date. Yet drug addiction rates remain [unchanged](#).

While God is at work everywhere—in our office buildings, in our homes, and even in the white marble halls of Capitol Hill—the libertarian Christian does not believe we can look to the government as the chief administrator of morality. It’s simply not cut out for the job.

On the other hand, in influencing society’s moral code, the libertarian Christian’s faith would tell her she’s not off the hook. The life-changing power of the Gospel is surely the only true way to transform individual lives and orient full cultures towards Christian virtue. God gave us his church as an earthly means to spread the message of Christ and redeem a broken world through grace. The libertarian Christian knows that the church as a whole, including herself as a part of the body of Christ, carries a great responsibility in transforming culture—an area in which the government will always fall short.

To the libertarian Christian, the answer to the question of which institutional sphere is the best influencer of morality is not the government or the free market, but the church.

Humility in Doing Good

Recognizing the limitations of the government takes great humility. It also comes with an inherent tension core to our nature. We are a people who want to be led. In 1 Samuel 8, the Israelites begged for a King to lead them despite Samuel's warnings that the ruler would oppress them and plunder their property. We expect our leaders to fix problems and achieve progress—or at least just try to *do* something. In Congress, “getting things done” is nearly regarded as a cardinal virtue, even if it comes at the expense of our liberty. We are uncomfortable existing in our fallen world and all the tension that comes with it, so we grab at anything to try to fix it. There's something about just “doing something” about a problem that feels good, even if the solution turns out to be severely flawed.

But some things just can't be fixed—by the government at least. Sometimes, we mustn't always *do* something, and that might feel unnatural to many. The libertarian Christian accepts this uncomfortable tension. She knows that political action isn't always the answer because she knows governments can't save the world from sin. She knows that, ultimately, only Christ is the fixer of her nation's problems. She knows when to “do less.” She knows when to be still and pray.

But the libertarian Christian also knows when to act. She knows that with freedom comes great responsibility. In [*What's Wrong with the World*](#), G.K. Chesterton says, “Most modern freedom is at root fear. It is not so much that we are too bold to endure rules; it is rather that we are too timid to endure responsibilities.” The libertarian Christian knows timidity is not an option. She knows if she wants liberty, she must take up the burdens that come along with it. She follows God's call to do good in the world and she strives to exemplify Christ's love as best she can, even though she knows she will fall short. She is intentional in building

relationships with her family, her church, her community, and those on the margins of society. The libertarian Christian knows what Lord Acton taught—that freedom is for doing what we ought, not what we like—and she lives accordingly.

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