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## Newsweek's Take on Evangelicals and Politics

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*Newsweek* declares this week that evangelicals are experiencing an “identity crisis.” That’s what observers inside and outside the movement have been saying ever since it was organized in the mid-twentieth century — and they have always been right.

With Election Day coming, it is no accident that the magazine’s focus is on evangelicals and politics. The report describes what it calls a “war between the religious right and believers who want to go broader.”

Here is the heart of the article, written by Lisa Miller:

*But now, more than three decades after Roe v. Wade propelled religious conservatives fully into the arena, a new generation of evangelical believers is pressing beyond the religious right of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, trying to broaden the movement’s focus from the familiar wars about sex to include issues of social and economic justice. The result is a new hour of decision for evangelicals: How much do they have to show for the decades of activism? And if they are to turn from what Roger Williams called “the garden of Christ’s church” to fight the battles of “the wilderness of the world,” what should those battles be?*

*For the first time in a long while, then, there is a serious rethinking of the politics of Jesus in America—or at least the efforts of different elements in the country, from believers of progressive, moderate and conservative bents, to claim they are acting in his name in the public sphere. “In this world ye shall have tribulation,” Jesus told his disciples—a decided understatement. Though he added the reassurance that they should “be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,” those disciples and their heirs down two millennia still face tribulation and trouble, and currently stand at a crossroads. Can they move beyond the apparent confines of the religious right as popularly understood, or are they destined to seem harsh and intolerant—the opposite of what their own faith would have them be? The search for an answer to that question goes to the heart of what American life and politics will look like as we face a landmark midterm election this week and a wide-open presidential race two years hence.*

Analysis of this kind comes regularly — and there is obviously something to it. Evangelical Christians *are* rethinking many questions in terms of political engagement, and this can be good and healthy.

On the other hand, we must watch the language carefully. Is Newsweek correct in suggesting that some evangelicals want to “go broader” in terms of issues, or is it something altogether different? With some, the concern is not a broadening at all, but a replacement of one set of issue concerns for another.

I can happily enter into conversation with evangelicals who really mean a broadening of concerns — but not an abandoning of issues like abortion, life ethics, and sexuality in order to embrace a new list of concerns. Which is it? Stay tuned.

