

# AlbertMohler.com

## Christian Responsibility In the City of Man: A Conversation with Peter Wehner

Monday, October 4, 2010

Peter Wehner Interview - *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era*

*Thinking in Public*

October 4, 2010

(This is a rush transcript. This copy may not be in its final form and maybe updated)

This is "Thinking in Public", a program dedicated to intelligent conversation about front line theological and cultural issues with the people who are shaping them. I'm Albert Mohler, your host, and President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Mohler: Every generation of Christians has to struggle with the question of religion and politics or more precisely the question of our Christian responsibility in the cultural and political arenas. Looking back over the last several years it is clear that we are living in a time of tremendous cultural change. In many ways there has been a reset of this equation. We can look back at developments such as the rise of the Christian right in the 1980's. And we can look at the reality of where we now stand in America in the second decade of the twenty-first century. We need to think in very serious ways and in ways that take us beyond mere platitudes and political certainties as we think about our Christian responsibility. This is going to require us to think theologically as well as politically, convictionally as well as culturally. That's why we're talking about it today on *Thinking in Public*.

It was several years ago I first met Pete Wehner he was then Deputy Assistant to President George W. Bush and Director of the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives. He is now Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center there in Washington D.C. Pete Wehner along with his friend Michael Gerson who was Senior Speech Writer for President George W. Bush has written a book *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era*. Now what Peter Wehner and Michael Gerson are calling for in this new book *City of Man* is a reset of the equation when it comes to discussing religion and politics in America. But they're speaking as and to evangelical Christians given our particular responsibility, given our Christian convictions for engagement in the public square. This is one of those books that is likely to create a lot of conversation. And that's why we're talking about it today on *Thinking in Public*. Pete Wehner welcome to the program.

Wehner: It's a delight to be with you Al thanks for having me on.

Mohler: Now let me just ask you. You obviously wrote this book because there was some sense of need. What was the sense of need that prompted the writing of this particular book.

Wehner: Well it was several things. Mike and I feel like that we're at a plastic moment, a fluid moment in the relationship between evangelicals and politics. The old movement, the religious right I think is fading away from the

scene for various reasons that we can go into, and I think that something is going to emerge to take its place. Mike and I had some ideas on what that movement should be, what its underpinning should be, what are some of the precepts and ideas that ought to form it. This is an ancient question as you know. It goes back to the time of Christ. And a lot of very smart people and wise people over the years have written on it but every generation has to apply old truths to new circumstances. And that's what we were trying to do.

Mohler: I think indeed it's an inevitable question the inevitability of the question comes down to the fact that we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom ultimately as Christians. But we are also citizens of an earthly kingdom. And coming to an accurate computation and understanding of those relative responsibilities is something that does come uniquely to every generation. But Pete I'm going to test a theory with you, when it comes to, for instance, looking at generational histories then the course of the Christian church, the reality is that many Christians never really had to think through this much. They simply had an inherited political model. They were living under a monarchy or dictatorship or some kind of government in which they had very little voice. But this comes as a particular challenge to evangelical Christians in America given the fact that we're in an experiment in ordered liberty—a republic and that does put more responsibility on Christians to figure these things out.

Wehner: Well that's exactly right. That's a very nice way to frame it. And one of the issues that Mike and I take up in this book is that the precepts that ought to guide Christians in their view of politics depends in part on the regime in which they live under. If you live under an authoritarian or totalitarian regime or monarchy then that requires one set of responses. And if you live in a democracy it requires something else. It's quite right in the history of Christianity, democracy republics they're relatively new and recent and it poses both an opportunity and a challenge for Christians. The opportunity is to try and direct policies that encourage human flourishing. The danger is that Christians get more closely associated with power and Christianity. And that relationship's power is very, very tricky. And Christ himself warned about it.

Mohler: Well I would presume that two men who worked in the White House so closely with an American president would be in pretty good position to evaluate. Now looking back over several years exactly what those threats might be. But I want to move first to the subtitle of your book *City of Man* the subtitle is *Religion and Politics in a New Era*. I think most of us sense we're in a new era. I've probably done more thinking and talking about this than almost anything else lately when it comes to the question of political Christian engagement. I've got my own ideas on the subject by you wrote this book and in this book you make an argument that the religious right is over. Very interestingly you say that's not a value judgment, that's a fact. So let's talk about that. Let's look back, and take a measure of the religious right.

Wehner: Yeah, it's a fair question and a good question and I think in taking the measure of the religious right you've got things both in my judgment and Mike's judgment that credit it and discredit it. I think on the plus side it was a movement of principle. And it advocated policies that I think were not only right but courageous most especially the culture of life question. And it was a movement, a defensive movement, against a kind of secular and largely liberal current fought and philosophy that really began to overtake this country in the late 1960's, 1970's and that gave rise to a kind of movement of resistance and that was embodied in part in the religious right. And I think that was important to do. On the other hand I think that the religious right in some of the ways that it approached questions in terms of tone and countenance made some mistakes I think there were some theological mistakes as well. I think that some of the leading spokesman of the religious right spoke about America as if it were a new Israel and would ascribe certain events to the judgment of God. For example that 9/11 was the judgment of God on America which I don't think is right. What you've also seen is that a new generation of younger Christians, people in their thirties and below, who associate themselves with the policies of the religious right increasingly have disassociated themselves with the image of the religious right and some of the spokesman that embodied the religious right and so you've got a number of people, I think a large segment of Christians who are looking for a new model, a new way to deal with the social engagement of some of these key cultural issues.

Mohler: I certainly hope you're right. You know there are several ways to read this situation. And one of them is through the lens of someone like Mark Twain and Pete you love literature, you may remember that Mark Twain somewhere basically that almost everyone, every man starts out young and optimistic and ends up old and cranky. And there's a sense in which if you're looking back at the late seventies early eighties the new Christian right looked like the coming thing—optimistic and hopeful. Certainly addressing issues of tremendous urgency. But there is the danger when you look back to for instance the late, well the last several years, let's just leave it at that. There does appear to be a crankiness that has entered in. And that has political consequences. I do fear, and I heard your optimism when you said

that these younger evangelicals hold to many of the same positions and convictions. But they want to change the tone. I have to say I believe we have to hope that's right. There is also evidence that they may be in late modernity here under the pressures of the cultural forces that are all around us. And given the massive impact of the media and higher education and all the rest, there may be some substantial value shifts there as well. But we'll get to that in a minute. Let's talk about the new Christian right in one specific question and that is as you look to the necessity of rethinking the question now, to what degree do we have to really go back to the beginning. In other words, you're not really just calling for a recalibration of the new religious right you're calling for a rethinking of the equation. And for that reason you have to go back further and you go back where many of us want always to go back which is first of all to the scriptures and especially to the New Testament as Christians find their grounding for any kind of cultural engagement and then to the seminal figure of Augustine. And when you write the *City of Man* you know you can't help but think of Augustine's great work *The City of God* in which he talks about the two cities and the Christian's relative responsibility to...the city of God which is ruled by the love of God and the passions that would be derivative of the love of God and then the city of man, which is a city of pride and human arrogance, where nonetheless those who are made in God's image reside and where Christians have a responsibility for their good. So as you're rethinking this how are you putting that together?

Wehner: Yeah, well we're not putting it together as well as Augustine....at the outset. Look, I think what you have to do is you have to keep those precepts in mind and exactly as you said which we are citizens of two kingdoms. Our loyalties are above to the city of God but we live in the city of man, and you have to engage these questions, these political questions because politics has profound human consequences. And you know better than I do if you go through the history of Christianity the pendulum has swung very widely from people who feel like they ought to be completely disengaged with politics, the Anabaptist movement and so forth those who've kind of had a full immersion of the two and religion in the state there was virtually no distinction. And my view and Mike's view is that there is a continuum here and that Christians should be involved in politics because we have an obligation to advance human dignity and human flourishing. But you have to do so in a way that is true and shows fidelity to Christianity and to the Lord and to the scriptures. And in a way that brings a kind of distinctive message to politics. That's why evangelical Christians, and Christian churches, and denominations shouldn't become completely and fully associated with political parties. There's no distinction between what we as Christians bring to politics and what political operatives do then I think there's something missing. We in this book try to offer a ten point plan on what Christians should think on particular issues. We have our views, we state them forthrightly in the book I think clearly enough in the book. What we really wanted to do was to think through some of the fundamental questions. For example, what's the role and purpose of the state from a Christian view? And we talk about things that's just order, justice, virtue and prosperity or what's the role of morality in foreign policy and that's very different then offering a check-list of voting items. And our view was informed in part because of something I said earlier which is the religious right was largely a defensive movement and for understandable reasons, but I think what that may have precluded or overshadowed was thinking through some basic fundamental first principle questions and that's what we try and do in the book. We wrestle with it, and you know again offer up something that's useful.

Mohler: Yeah, you know I think many Christians are basically unaware of the fact that there has been a tremendous theological investment in this throughout the history of the Christian church. And you have on the one end a Constantinianism which is most closely associated with the Catholic church historically that basically the church and the state can unify in a way that leads to a Christian society. On the other hand you do have the radical reformation and the Anabaptist who have an extreme sectarianism and do their very best to withdraw from the public square from any engagement. And in the middle you've got all kinds of other things. I mean we're talking here about two cities using the great model given to us by Augustine the great bishop of the fifth century. But when it comes to, for instance, the Reformation churches the Reform churches and Lutheran churches went in two very different directions. And the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms of two completely separate spheres that turns out not to be too helpful in American in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reformed understanding of the Christian influence in culture it's also there but I'll tell you and that's where I would find my home. But Pete I've got to tell you, the great concern I have when people start quoting Abraham Kiper and others is that there's the ambition or at least the sense of possibility even of the Christian political engagement that can create a Christian culture. You're not really suggesting that there can be the creation of a Christian culture rather than that there will be Christian influence in this culture.

Wehner: Yes that's an important distinction. No I don't think we can create a Christian culture. I think part of that frankly is grounded in scripture itself and Christ said that the world hated me and the world will hate you. And really in a deep way this is not our home.

Mohler: That's right.

Wehner: And it wasn't supposed to be our home. Look, what's one of the you know when Ananias talked to Saul before the conversion what did he say? He was quoting the Lord, I'm going to show you all that you must suffer for my sake and over and over again in the gospels, in the epistles, what are we told? We're told that there's going to be persecution and hardship but keep, let the eyes of your heart be enlightened to the hope that is ours in Christ in the coming kingdom. So there's always tension between those two cities. And I reject the idea that you can have a Christian culture or that we have a Christian America that doesn't mean that you can't advance what we would deem to be Christian objectives. The Appalachian Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Pro-Life Movement, I think you can argue with a great deal of persuasion. You know advance things that advance justice and advance things that I think that the Lord would care about. But that's really quite different than think that you can take power, and take control, and take authority, and take dominion over culture, or society, or political movements that's just outside of our realm. We weren't called to do it, and I don't think we can do it.

Mohler: You know looking back at the new Christian right it's very easy to look back and see that there were major category errors. There were precious important, urgent, threatened values and moral convictions that had to be preserved and had to be the issue of our contention had to be asserted in the public square in a way that can only be described as a matter of basic Christian faithfulness. But that same faithfulness in this new era calls us to rethink the equation.

Mohler: My conversation with Pete Wehner about the book he has just written with Michael Gerson entitled *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era* is an attempt to reset. And you know as I think about it, it raises certain questions in my mind. I think the most basic questions of Christian political engagement when it comes to actually how we make a tangible approach to a government or to a society visible before our eyes. The background question has to be what exactly we can or should expect from government. When I come back with Pete Wehner that's the question I'm going to ask him.

Mohler: I'm talking with Pete Wehner of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., author of the book *City of Man* along with his friend Michael Gerson. You know Pete you and Michael both had extensive experience in the Bush White House. You were there at the center of so many things happenings. And now you're writing this book. Is this book something of a mea culpa? Is it a reset of your own thinking? Talk the personal angle on this.

Wehner: No it's not a mea culpa and I'm not even sure it's a reset. Mike and I when we were in the White House talked about these questions quite frankly a lot and I talked to them with friends, people in bible studies and I've been involved in public policy and politics for my entire adult life one way or another. These things have always been out there this and intention between being involved in politics, being careful about it, not being drawn into it, not succumbing to the temptations of power, trying to create things in your life that resisted. I haven't always done it, but it's something I've been aware of and I must say when we were in the White House there was less of tension and less temptations than I actually would have imagined than I think that was frankly because of the quality of the people we worked with. Mike and I were never in a position where we were asked to do anything that we felt compromised our principles. We were around people who were involved in politics for what we thought were noble and good reason. We made mistakes in execution and mistakes in policy but in terms of conscience, our conscience is clear on that score. But you know when you're involved in politics at that level, you know what the temptation is, just to give you examples, one of the chapters in our book is devoted to tone and how Christians should engage in public arguments, and we make the case that you can have passionate spirited faith. But it needs to be civil, and you need to be able to treat people with a certain amount of dignity and a certain amount of respect. But I can tell you when you were there in the cockpit and the incoming fire is there and people that you, president that you respect and have affection for, is not only being attacked but in your estimation being slandered, you want to respond. And how do you respond in a way that is appropriate and civil and even deeper than civility with a spirit of grace. What does that mean? How does that work itself out? Is it practical? Is it counter-productive?

Mohler: And of course there is great question as to how much control you actually have over tone. We certainly have control over our tone as we engage and speak. But we don't always even have control over how that tone is going to be received or interpreted or for that matter manipulated and communicated in the public square. And that's one of the reasons why this takes a lot of give and take. In other words you win some you lose some, you learn a lot along the way. You know Pete, you've invested so much of your life in this what do you hope for out of government? Let's talk about the essence of your book. What should Christians hope for out of government?

Wehner: I think what we ought to hope for government we ought to push government to do is to advance order, and justice, and virtue, and prosperity. Now, it doesn't do it perfectly and there are limits to it, and in our book we talk about the areas where government has more or less control than power. For example, government has a much bigger role in a category of order than it does in virtue I think. On the other hand laws are an embodiment of our moral life and they reflect a moral disposition in what we affirm and what we condemn, and so laws are very important in terms of shaping moral sentiments. George Will years ago wrote a book called *Statecraft as Soulcraft*. Now that may overstate things a bit certainly from a Christian perspective in terms of soul, but when you read his book and you understand what Will is arguing which is to shave moral sentiments. You know law and government is important in that regard on really a whole range of questions, and you know Mike and I have seen government do well and we've seen it done poorly. But at the end I'm not cynical and neither is Mike about government and what government can do. Again, I just want to re-emphasize that there are limitations to it and as a Christian there are inherent limitations of what we think government can achieve here on earth. But given those limitations, it can do quite a lot that's good and whether you're talking about crime, whether you're talking about the pro-life issue, or whether you're talking about drug use or civil rights and so forth.

Mohler: You know when it comes to the role of the Christian in society you cite one of my dear friends and mentors the late Carl F.H. Henry. And the distinction he made between the church and the Christian's responsibility. And you know all the things in your book that I think are important to be present, I think that might be the most important section because there are many Christians who simply assume that an individual Christian citizen's responsibility is the church's responsibility. And you go back to a very healthy kind of balance in the political theory of Carl Henry when you point out that the church is called to offer general principles on the basis of the preaching of the gospel and of the word of God. It's really up to individual Christians to work out exactly how that works and where the implications will lead us in terms of the actual give and take and context of decision making in politics.

Wehner: That's right and Carl Henry as you know said that the church ought to articulate general principles bearing social concern, but ought to leave it to individuals to apply those principles in particular cases. And we tell the story about Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, and how back in the late 1960's he had written a piece for *Christianity Today* which Carl Henry was editing at the time and they got into a debate because Richard had wanted to argue that the church should be more actively involved in the anti-war cause in this case having to do with Vietnam. And Carl Henry tried to warn him off of that and essentially arguing look that's dangerous territory because that's not the role of the church. The church articulates a general moral principle but individual Christians bring expertise to these questions. They have to work this out themselves and just recently Richard Mouw wrote a piece that was titled *Carl Henry was Right* and he conceded that fact. And we agree with Henry.

Mohler: You know Pete one of my favorite reminiscences of the last several years in terms of the politics was an article that was written about you. And as I recall you were in the White House with your two little boys and they started a sword fight. As a matter of fact, I think Peggy Noonan may have told that story. So how are they doing now?

Wehner: They're doing great. They're doing great. Our oldest John Paul is twelve, and we have a girl Christine who is ten and David who is six. And they're still engaging in figurative sword fights trying to slay dragons and bad people. And we're trying to raise them in the Lord with the right set of values and they're great blessings to Cindy and to me.

Mohler: Well there's just something right about a dad at work in the White House and his two little boys having an imaginary sword fight in the hall. Pete Wehner thanks for joining me today for *Thinking in Public*.

Wehner: Thanks a lot Al, enjoyed being with you.

Mohler: I enjoyed that conversation with Pete Wehner and I'm glad that Pete and his friend Michael Gerson have written this new book *City of Man*. I think it's going to prompt a lot of discussion. But the larger issue is also now prompting a great deal of discussion as Christians must rethink this question of our responsibility as Christian citizens in a new era. We can look backwards, and we can certainly see where there was too much optimism on the part of the new Christian right. There was a political hubris that had basically made its way into our evangelical worldview and understanding insofar as we, apparently, in terms of what was said by many of our leaders actually seemed to imply that we believed that if we just got the laws right, the people would be right. Well there's a biblical order here that reminds us that the law insofar as the law is put in place by fallible human creatures, that that law actually reflects the culture that produces it. Now one of the confidences of Pete Wehner and Michael Gerson is that the law can have a moral influence

on society. I share some of that confidence. But I'm also aware of the fact that the laws are never much better than the people are. And what we have in a society is the reality that what we end up with is a civic order is remarkably akin to who we are as a people. We are armed as Christians with the theological reservoir of resources that enable us to understand this. We have the categories of common grace. We have the categories of political responsibility and engagement. We have the category of the city of God and the city of man. These things are given to us. We are inheritors of these things in order that we can come to understand them. But you know this is where Christians also need to be reminded of the fact that the church's primary responsibility is a gospel responsibility. That our ultimate concern, the ultimate concern of the church, is not with this earthly kingdom nor with the city of man, but with the city of God. And the only message we have that points persons toward the city of God and how they can be made right with God is the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the church is first of all a gospel community regardless of the regime, regardless of the government, regardless of the political season, the church must in essence, irreducibly be the gospel people. We're also the people who must never invest in government, the hope for any kind of salvation. Politically utopianism should be a theological impossibility for biblical Christians. But at the same time there is no retreat. We can't go into a cave and retreat as sectarians and believe that we have absolutely no political responsibility. When it comes to living in a republican form of government where citizens have a vote, the decision not to vote is itself a form of a political decision. There's no escape. The issue for Christians is how to be faithful in the midst of this. Pete Wehner made the interesting observation that a younger generation of evangelicals is revisiting this question. And they're looking backwards especially over the new Christian right asking some basic questions. Looking to see if indeed the new Christian right was a noble or failed experiment. It's interesting that Gerson and Wehner say it's probably both, and I think they bring a good deal of mature wisdom to answering that question. But you know as we look to this question, I think the most urgent issue is not just an analysis of the new Christian right nor just an analysis of the coming generation but the reality that there is no escaping our biblical responsibility to be faithful to Christ in every arena of life. And in the arena of politics we've got to be the humble people who know that politics can never deliver the kind of hopes that many people invest in it. But we also know that politics is a necessary realm of our involvement when we have been left in this world as salt and light. The church is a gospel people. The most important thing we need to keep in mind is that we have the message of salvation. And regardless of the regime, regardless of the monarch, the president, the dictator, the prime minister, regardless of our political context or season the reality is that the church goes on and preaches the word of God, teaches the word of God, tells people about Jesus. At the same time as Christians we are left here with a responsibility. Perhaps the best word here is stewardship. We have a political stewardship. We have a stewardship as Christian citizens and figuring out exactly how to exercise that stewardship most affectively that's going to take the best thinking, the keenest analysis, the most devoted prayer of every generation. We're living in times in which some of the most basic questions of human value and morality are very much on the line. We're living in a time of vast social foment and experimentation. Christians can't sit out as if we have no investment in this. At the same time, this is just another reminder to us that we are living in a fallen world. And it acts and sounds and smells just like a fallen world. We are not looking forward to finding our hopes resolved and our dreams realized in this world. It's in the world to come. But in this world there is still important work to do and even for the church whose most important work is the work of the Gospel, there is also the work of being in this world but not of it that is left with us.

Thanks for listening to *Thinking in Public*. I hope you'll listen again next time. In the meantime go to the website at [sbts.edu](http://sbts.edu) for resources about Southern Seminary. And also go to [albertmohler.com](http://albertmohler.com) for a wealth of resources available to you about any number of issues. You'll also find links to the other program *The Briefing* which is a podcast available on both i-tunes and through [albertmohler.com](http://albertmohler.com).

I hope you'll know about Southern Seminary's Preview Day on October 15. It's an unprecedented opportunity for you to come visit the campus, sit in the classroom, meet students and professors, and come to understand what is going on on this campus and why we consider it so important and such a privilege. I'll look forward to seeing you at Southern Seminary's Preview Day. For more information go to [sbts.edu](http://sbts.edu). I'll meet you next time for *Thinking in Public* until then, let's keep thinking.

