

How to Be a Christian Libertarian

Is it possible to be both a Christian and a libertarian?

In a forthcoming book, *Called to Freedom: Why You Can Be Christian & Libertarian*, six Christian libertarians offer an emphatic, “yes,” exploring key tensions and challenging a range common critiques (whether from conservative Christians or secular libertarians). The project is currently seeking funds via Indiegogo, where you can donate or pre-order your copy.

Having already discussed the topic on numerous occasions with two of the book’s authors—Jacqueline Isaacs and Elise Daniel—I asked them a few questions about their latest endeavor, the overarching ideas and what they hope to achieve.

How did you become libertarian Christians?

ED: I grew up in a Christian, conservative home. Because of my upbringing, I always assumed Christians were also conservatives. Growing up, I didn’t know much about libertarians, other than that they wanted to legalize drugs, so I thought there was at least some sort of moral gap between Christians and libertarians. I grew stronger in both my faith and political convictions in college. I studied economics and attended an economics seminar on free markets. It was there that I was first introduced to Austrian economists like Ludwig Von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. For the first time, I was thinking about economics from a classical liberal framework, and it made a lot of sense to me. During the seminar, I had conversations with students and professors who called themselves libertarian and realized some of my assumptions—like that libertarians were all moral relativists—were false. I came out of that week with serious

doubts about the role of liberty in modern conservatism and more respect for the libertarian perspective.

JI: I also grew up as a Christian in a conservative home. I viewed politics as a web of distinct issues, and being pro-life and anti-taxes just seemed to make me a conservative. It wasn't until I was in high school that I began to understand holistic political philosophies and libertarianism, specifically by reading books like *The Law* by Frederic Bastiat. I realized that caring about things like free markets and low taxes and the dignity of life didn't make me a conservative; I cared about those things because of a worldview that valued freedom—and that worldview was informed by my Christian faith.

How do you define liberty more broadly, as Christians?

JI: As Christians, we believe we were created in God's image but now exist in a fallen, sinful state where we are not free to express God's image fully. However, Christ has offered us redemption, through which we are reconciled to Him and can again do His work to help restore the world and bring about His kingdom. We unpack this more in the book and we use this framework of creation, fall, redemption, restoration to discuss our political philosophy. Liberty, understood through this story, is our gift through Christ to overcome our sin and again show God's image to the world around us. This is why Paul speaks of being free, but using his freedom to be a servant to others (1 Cor. 9:19; Gal. 5:13).

Our co-author, Jason Hughey, gives a broad definition of libertarianism in his chapter, but the important thing about this book is that the six authors represent a wide range of libertarian thought, just as we do a wide range of theological traditions. We don't all agree on every minute policy issue, but we all agree that liberty is the highest political end. Lord Acton famously said, "Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end." We use

the word “liberty” in the same manner as he did. We want people, all of us imperfect image-bearers of God, to be able to create value in society, engage actively in community and bring glory to God unhindered by the government.

How does that view of liberty lead to or connect with *political* liberty as advanced by libertarianism?

JJ: Our broad view of liberty connects to this libertarian political philosophy by keeping some perspective on what a political philosophy is and is not. We hold worldviews, informed by our Christian faith, that promote liberty. A libertarian political philosophy is an application of that worldview onto the political sphere. In a way, our libertarian political philosophy is a sub-category of our great worldview, but not the totality of it. We see other Christian worldviews, such as ones with a strong justice focus, holding liberal political philosophies. We also see non-Christian worldviews that can hold libertarian political philosophies, such as Objectivism. One of the main points of our book comes from this idea: we are all Christians first and then libertarians.

Given that prioritization—Christians first, libertarians second—do you see any tensions between the two?

ED: It was at the same economics seminar I mentioned earlier that I also first encountered a strong tension between Christianity and libertarianism. During our discussion groups, one student told me I couldn’t be both a libertarian and a Christian because libertarianism was rational and faith in God was not. On another occasion, a student made a case for self-ownership over state ownership, mocking the possibility of God as the owner of mankind. I received foul looks from a philosophy professor when I told him I appreciated the teachings of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. While I didn’t expect the group of students to be overwhelmingly Christian, I didn’t expect to be met with such hostility either. What may have disturbed me the most, though, was the

general support for Ayn Rand's moral philosophy, which promotes selfishness as a virtue and self-sacrifice as a vice. I realized later that I could still be a libertarian without accepting Rand's bizarre moral philosophy, but all of these experiences made me question whether or not my faith was truly compatible with libertarianism since I felt like the only Christian in the room.

So how do you address that? One critique of libertarianism is that it's too individualistic to square with the sacrificial and communal obligations of Christianity. How does your view of Christian libertarianism frame the individual in relation to community?

JI: This is one of the biggest arguments that I hear from conservative Christians, and it's important to all of us that we address this concern. As libertarian Christians, we believe that Christians need to take on more responsibility as individuals, families and communities. Freedom requires more of us, not less of us. The free society that we dream of requires that we are radically involved in our communities. Again, as imperfect image-bearers of God, we are charged with imitating Him in our world. The way I like to frame this, and how I say it in the book is, "God created everything out of nothing, and we can create economic value out of scarcity. God redeems us from our sins, and we work towards redeeming others from poverty, ignorance and disease. God respects our freedom, even to reject Him, and we respect the freedom of others in our society."

Given that many conservative Christians see liberty as a central part of what they're *conserving* (at least in the American political system), where does libertarianism diverge from conservative principles and priorities?

JI: Earlier, and throughout the book, we talk about experiencing a tension between our faith and political liberty. I argue in my chapter that this tension is a result

of the fall. While we were made to exist in perfect relationship with God and in perfect liberty, we are no longer able to do so because of the fall. Experiencing this tension is not wrong, it is a fact of our fallen lives, which is a major theme of our book. While this may be an oversimplification, when traditional Christian values and individual liberty come into tension in our political conversations, conservatives tend to default toward protecting our values and morals, while libertarians will default towards protecting liberty. This is another example where we say liberty requires more of us, not less of us. We believe that Christians should aim to protect or “conserve” both our values and liberty.

Why did you all decide to write this book? What do you hope for it to accomplish?

ED: We all met in 2012 in a young professionals book club in the D.C. area that focused on the intersection of Christianity and economic freedom. We read books like *Defending the Free Market* by Father Sirico, *A Humane Economy* by Wilhelm Ropke, even a book by Jim Wallis about the financial crisis (that one was opposition research). The group members ranged from conservative to libertarian, igniting a dynamic conversation about the compatibility of political liberty with Christianity. When I was offered an opportunity to fill a panel at the International Students for Liberty Conference in 2014, I wanted to bring this very conversation about the role of faith and political liberty to a libertarian conference, so I threw out an open invitation to the book club and the authors of the book are the five panelists who joined me.

We called ourselves “The Jesus Panel” and it drew more attention than we expected—every seat was filled, and dozens of students stood packed in the back of the room. After our presentation, we talked to several students, both Christians and non-Christians, who thanked us for being there. Some of them reminded me of myself when I was at that first seminar,

wondering if I was the only Christian among so many agnostic libertarians. The students inspired us to get our ideas down on paper so that the next time we speak with a someone caught in the middle between Christianity and libertarianism, we can hand them a tool that will help them articulate their beliefs and remind them they aren't alone in wrestling with these ideas. On top of that, I hope this book helps change the perception of libertarians in Christian circles. I believe the success of the "liberty movement" in drawing in conservatives hinges on welcoming and embracing the Christian faith.