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## Maintaining Allegiance: A Review of Compassion and Conviction

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## Maintaining Allegiance: A Review of Compassion and Conviction

### Abstract

"Our ultimate allegiance should be to Christ and His kingdom, prioritizing both the Great Commission and our call to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God above any other callings."

Posting about the book *Compassion and Conviction* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/maintaining-allegiance-a-review-of-compassion-conviction/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Compassion and Conviction, guide, faithful, civic engagement, Justin Giboney, Michael Wear, Chris Butler

### Comments

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# in things

November 5, 2020

## **Maintaining Allegiance: A Review of *Compassion & Conviction***

**Donald Roth**

**Title:** *Compassion & Conviction: The AND Campaign's Guide to Faithful Civic Engagement*

**Author:** Justin Giboney, Michael Wear, Chris Butler

**Publisher:** IVP Academic

**Publishing Date:** July 21, 2020

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Christians are under pressure today in America, and this pressure came to a particular climax this November with the opportunity to vote in the national election. There's so much at stake that Christians can't afford to be passive, even if it is exhausting. We are at war, and the battle lines are drawn. The enemy will not pull punches, and so we must be strong in our convictions and courageous to stand up for the truth.

I may have lost some readers by this point. You either know the script or know enough about me (i.e. that I'm both politically and theologically conservative) to head to the comments section in either full-throated approval or condemnation of where you know I'm headed with this. If you haven't quite done that, but were about to, I'd ask you to hold on for at least one more paragraph.

You see, the devil is at work in this world, and he has declared war on God and His people. If we claim to be citizens of God's kingdom, then we are at war, and we often find that we live in enemy territory. We're under pressure in America, but the most

serious danger isn't oppression or persecution. What's true for kids is true for us all—the pressure that is most likely to get us to compromise our primary allegiance is pressure from our peers, not our opponents. That is, in this partisan political age, it's often our political partners who are the ones most likely to successfully pressure us to compromise our convictions in order to remain part of the group we identify with. This insight is the driving thesis behind ***Compassion & Conviction: The AND Campaign's Guide to Faithful Civic Engagement***, and I believe it merits serious consideration.

### **The Book in Summary**

This short book is something that could easily be read in an afternoon, and it's unlikely that the pages will contain any ideas that are totally new to a Christian who is at least modestly politically involved. However, it contains a number of well-phrased observations, practical lists, and even an appendix with small group exercises that transcend the more banal fare that I typically see in the questions and exercises appended to other similar books. Ultimately, it provides a simple, biblical framework for civic engagement that seeks to avoid partisanship while still being concrete enough that it moves beyond easy platitudes.

This framework is encapsulated in the “&” that provides the name of the organization, and it is spelled out early in the book.

America's current political system separates love from truth, compassion from conviction, and social justice from moral order as if they're somehow at odds with one another. People who support social justice issues generally don't support traditional views of morality and vice versa. But there's no clear reason why those two stances should be separate. It's just presented to us as the only way, and we accept it. Most people aren't aware that a viable alternative exists. (39)

The authors argue that neither truth nor love are truly realized without the other, and justice cannot be achieved apart from moral order. They urge Christians to refuse the “or” offered in so much of our political dialog, and the book is structured by a series of “ands” that covers politics, civics, engaging the civic structure, partisanship, rhetoric, identity, advocacy, and civility each in turn.

Although the authors have backgrounds primarily tied to the Democratic party, they offer cogent critique of both sides. Of progressives, they say, “When we think about what it means to be progressive, we think about moving forward and fixing things. That can be good, but being progressive is not the solution to every situation. For instance, if you're on the edge of a cliff, to progress or lean forward isn't such a good idea.” (51) At the same time, “Conservatism can assume an equal playing field that doesn't exist

between different demographics, and it can be so focused on principles and systems...that it overlooks how people are actually doing under those systems and principles.” (52) The authors ultimately encourage their readers to reject the intellectual ease of seeking to be progressive or conservative on all issues because it makes Christians easy to manipulate, ready to overlook where theological and ideological conservatism part ways or where progressive conceptions of social justice depart from a biblical understanding. At its root, this book argues that our ultimate allegiance should be to Christ and His kingdom, prioritizing both the Great Commission and our call to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God above any other callings.

This may still feel somewhat generic, and I think there is some room for that criticism, even if it’s probably intentional. It can be easy to nurture a sense of common ground when we remain safely vague, but while the book is careful not to get too far into the weeds, it does offer some concrete frameworks that readers can apply fruitfully to their own lives. Out of concern for length and not spoiling the book too much, I will limit myself to two examples.

### **Examining ourselves**

The first example offers a framework and exercise for thinking about how our beliefs are formed. As the authors note, “In many cases our perspective has been so thoroughly shaped—or even disciplined—by worldly ideologies that we mistake our flawed ideological positions for Christian positions.” I would argue more strongly that we are undoubtedly being disciplined by the world even as we think we’re being led purely by scripture. This isn’t even always nefarious; it’s just a few basic facts about human cognition at work. First, human beings tend to perceive a greater level of coherence to our own thought than is actually present. Second, much of our understanding of the world is dependent on our social environment, and no one’s environment is so purely biblical that worldly frameworks fail to affect us. It tends to be so greatly a part of the air we breathe that we’re unaware of it, and this renders us much better at seeing the speck in someone else’s eye than the log in our own.

As an antidote, the authors recommend a sort of ideological audit. To start, you catalog your policy position on a number of controversial issues. Then, try to think back to when you first came to hold those positions and how. Further, the authors recommend identifying a few of these issues where people who you believe are committed Christians disagree with you. Then, you should work to understand their perspective. The authors believe that such an exercise will help readers more easily discern where policy views are truly rooted in the commands of scripture and where they might be rooted in secondary issues on which Christians can disagree in good faith.

The central application of this exercise is to think about the partnerships that we form. Where we pursue common causes with secular forces or unbelievers, the authors urge us to be rooted firmly in our identity in Christ, aware of our partners' desired endgame, objectives, and values, and careful to avoid merging our identity with their own. We do this by both being aware of the nature of our partnerships and willing to critique the partners we work with.

### **Standing on Principle**

The second example stakes out the authors' position as idealists, and I find myself sympathetic to this fact. Early on, they call Christians to cling to the high road, saying,

When in conflict we should demonstrate that our public witness is more important than winning a political battle...It's better to lose than to sacrifice our virtue for the sake of what is politically expedient, to defend leaders' harmful policies, or to condone immorality. It is better to lose that temporal battle. If our actions don't glorify God and serve as the salt and the light of the world, then they are good for nothing. (17)

This fits well with the book's basic thesis that our allegiance to Christ must be placed clearly above any other secular or temporal priorities. Principles matter, and they're why I chose to abstain from voting in the presidential election four years ago.

That said, the stakes appear genuinely higher in 2020, as polarization and reactionary choices by both parties have been amplifying the general willingness to reject norms that make for the peaceful transitions of power we've seen throughout the history of the U.S. As described by several of those I knew in Washington D.C. who spent their lives on the Hill, the U.S. Senate has long run governed more by gentlemen's agreement than parliamentary rules, making it more moderate and less raucous than the House. This character has been eroding and may be discarded altogether soon. Among other factors, this has me worried for the future of our republic in ways I wasn't four years ago.

While the quote I started this section with strikes me as true, it surely can't be principled to essentially fiddle while Rome burns. There is a point at which we run the risk of patting ourselves on the back for principled behavior, when in fact we are licensing apathy or surrender, essentially committing an unforced error. There are many parties on both sides who will argue that anything but total Christian capitulation to specific cultural values will mar our witness. Second best to capitulation, these parties can use this argument to neutralize the threat by driving Christians to pressure one another into silence or inaction.

In the end, I don't reject the quote above, but I do feel more conflicted and uncertain than I have in past years. I agree with the authors' opinion that the greater danger is pressure to compromise our witness from those on "our" side, but if co-belligerence with these erstwhile partners is itself seen as a compromise of our witness (an argument I've heard made by those on both Right and Left with unusual stridency this year), then I worry that we're allowing a **stereotype threat** to make us into naïve and, ironically, easily manipulated political actors all over again.

### **Pledging Allegiance**

Ultimately, this book is a plea to prioritize our allegiance to Christ's kingdom above any earthly powers. It makes the natural, all too often neglected argument that the Great Commission should be an ultimate goal that allows Christians to find genuine alliance with one another that cannot be found in a political party. Based on this, it should be true that Christianity transcends party lines. Even though we seem to be seeing the opposite trend today, this book represents a cogent call to resist that tide. For Christians leaning right or left, there is much to approve of in this book, but there is also much to yet be worked out. May it be that we all commit to renewing our allegiance to our highest common calling, using this as an undisputable common ground for finding unity as the body of Christ in the midst of a fractured and fracturing age.