

W I D E N Our Imagination

Mediating institutions Churches as Mediating Institutions

“Faith is a certain widening of the imagination.”
Louise Cowan

Louise Cowan (1916-2015) was a college professor, lover of the liberal arts, and a devoted Christian. She defined *faith* as “a certain widening of the imagination,” citing the angel Gabriel’s visit with Mary.¹ A betrothed virgin, Mary learned she’d soon be pregnant. *How can this be?* Mary manifests trust in God, faith, asking Gabriel to widen her imagination as to how this will happen. Gabriel did. The Holy Spirit will impregnate her. The result is Mary’s Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55), a deepening faith formed by a widening imagination. This reading is a resource designed to widen our imagination, our faith. The topic is “mediating institutions.” It’s written mainly for those who recognize our post-Christian age, those who seek proven resources so that they may impact it, with the aim of widening how we imagine the church as a mediating institution.

A Public Interest

There’s a spiking mental health crisis among America’s youth. It’s mostly attributable to heavy social media use by girls ages 11–13, boys 14–15, and at age 19 for both sexes. Columnist Peggy Noonan asks: “Why can’t we put a strict age limit on using social-media sites: You have to be 18 to join TikTok, Youtube, Instagram? Why not? You’re not allowed to drink at 14 or drive at 12; you can’t vote at 15. Isn’t there a public interest here?”

Yes, there is. It’s based on America being an experiment in self-governance. Can a free people be self-governed? This requires holding in tension private and public interests. Mediating institutions do this.

Mediating Institutions

The Editorial Board of *The Wall Street Journal* recognized this. In the aftermath of the shooting at the Uvalde, Texas, elementary school, it wrote that “today’s young killers are typically from middle-class families with access to smartphones and X-boxes. Their deficit is social and spiritual. The rise of family dysfunction and the decline of mediating institutions such as churches and social clubs have consequences.” How true.

We also see the decline of mediating institutions such as churches in Friday’s Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*. The 1973 Court decision was an egregious encroachment on these institutions. Healthy democracies encourage government of the people, by the people, for the people—not by nine unelected officials. Overturning *Roe v. Wade* returns the issue of abortion to the people and their duly elected representatives, what was happening up until 1973 when *Roe v. Wade* upended that democratic process. Even pro-abortion Supreme Court judges such as Ruth Bader Ginsburg said it was a bad decision.

But all these issues raise questions: Why are churches considered “mediating institutions?” And between what do they mediate? And what’s required to act as a mediating institution? Alexis de Tocqueville knew.

¹ Louise Cowan, “How Classics Address Our Imaginations” *Mars Hill Audio Journal* 1998. Vol. 34.

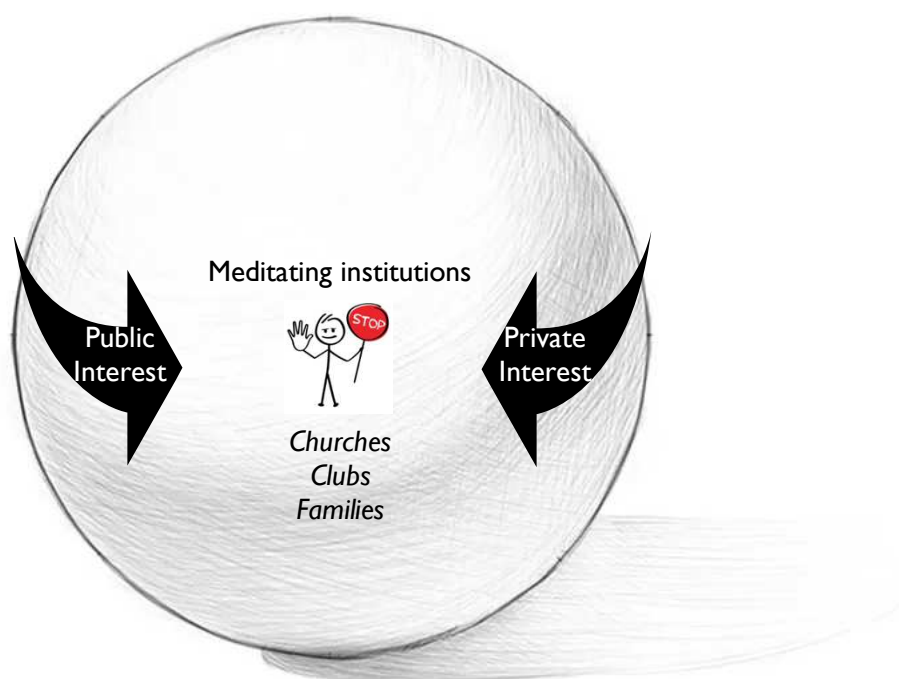
Mediating Institutions

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was a French aristocrat, diplomat, and historian. He is best known for his book *Democracy in America*, which he wrote after spending 10 months of 1831 and 1832 in the United States on a mission from France to study American prisons. But his mission expanded to studying how the American Revolution had created a flourishing society, a self-governing democracy. The French Revolution hadn't done this. It had failed disastrously. Tocqueville hoped that by detailing how democracy worked in America, French leaders might be able better to guide France's own transition to democracy.

One of Tocqueville's key insights was recognizing America's experiment in self-governance requires mediating institutions—churches, schools, fraternal organizations, professional associations, and even clubs—serving as a bulwark of freedom against the encroaching power of the state and its public interests. But to serve in this mediating role, the church for example had to have *gravitas*, or cultural capital. Early on in America she did.

As did the church in the Middle Ages. The great universities founded in that era were not state institutions but rather independent guilds of students or masters who associated to organize their affairs and preserve their rights. The church served as a mediating institution between the private interests of these guilds and the public interests of the state. Theology was situated in the center of the sciences, serving as the “queen science.”

America's experiment in self-government works the same way. It flows from the center, from mediating institutions such as the church, the family, the arts, learning and science guilds, and business enterprises. In a flourishing self-governing democracy, they serve as a bulwark of freedom between public *and* private interests.

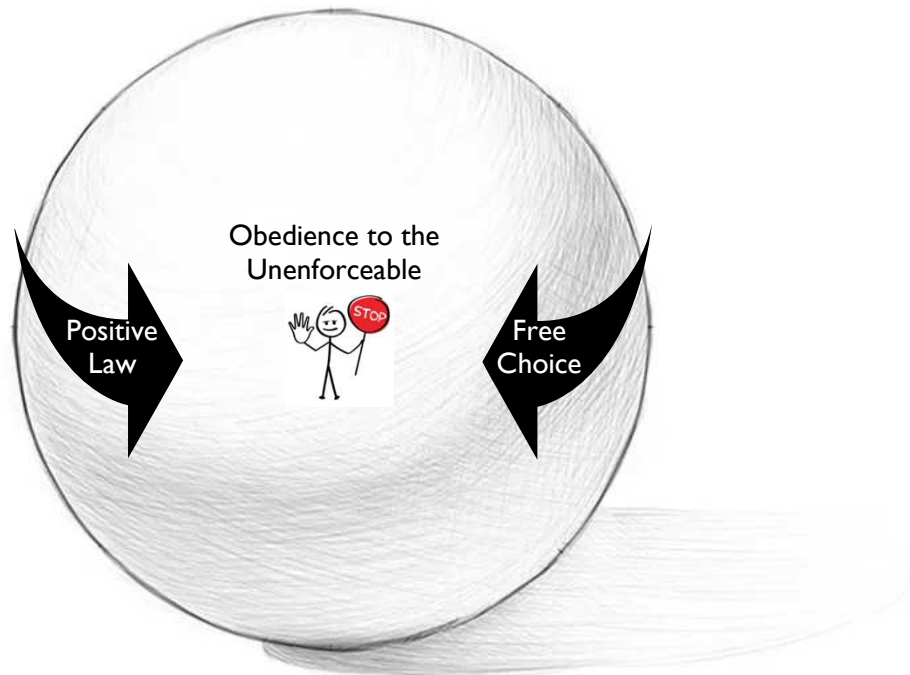


Private interests? Yes. A second insight by Tocqueville was the rise of what he called the “Individualist.” These are individuals who prize private interests over the public interest. Less than a century later, in 1921, Lord John Fletcher Moulton noted the role of private and public interests in depicting a self-governing society, much as Tocqueville did a century before. But Moulton coined a memorable phrase to describe the impact that flows from mediating institutions: obedience to the unenforceable.

Obedience to the Unenforceable

John Fletcher Moulton was Minister of Munitions for Great Britain at the outbreak of World War I. Shortly after the war, in 1921, he gave a speech titled “Law and Manners.” He pictured society as a sphere containing “three great domains of Human Action.”² On one side is the domain of Free Choice, “which includes all those actions as to which we claim and enjoy complete freedom.” Complete freedom—not limitless freedom.

Mediating institutions form societies that recognize freedom has its limits. We are not free to behave in any way choose. The church as a mediating institution reminds us that God created humankind to be free, but with limited freedom. This is reflected in a second domain on the opposite side of the sphere: Positive Law.



Moulton noted on the other side of the sphere is the domain of Positive Law, “where our actions are prescribed by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed.” The church as a mediating institution reminds us that we see this in creation: “You shall not eat from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” But Adam and Eve did eat the forbidden fruit, plunging the world into sin. So the church reminds us God established government for the execution of justice (Ps.99:4). But Law has limits, as the Anglican Samuel Johnson noted: “How small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or kings can cause or cure.”

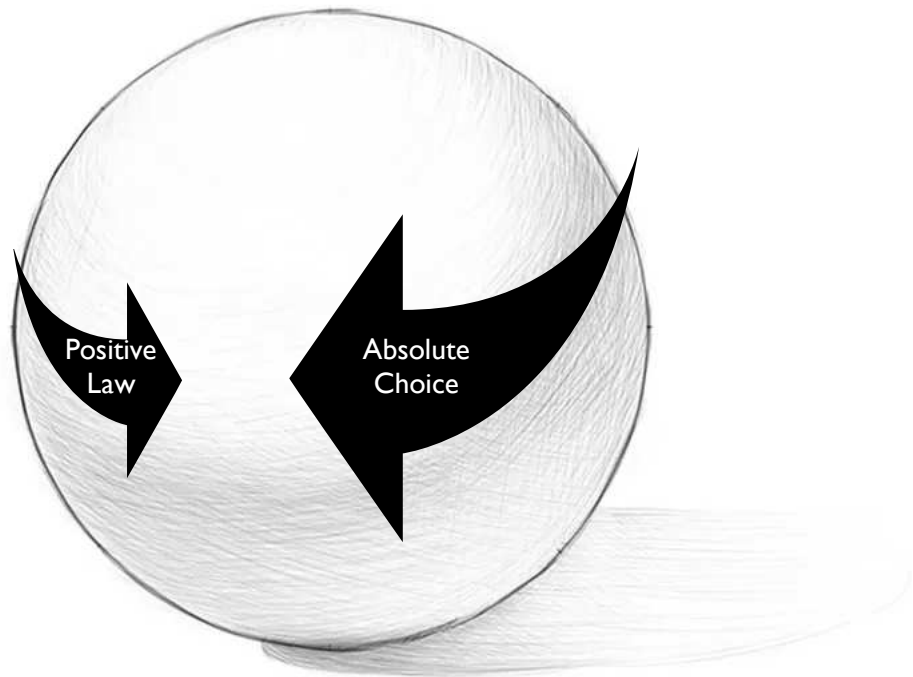
Moulton noted between these two domains is where “our actions are not prescribed by law, nor are we free to behave in any way we choose.” It is “doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.” Moulton felt this domain is most important, as “the real greatness of a nation, its true civilization, is measured by the extent of this land of obedience to the unenforceable.” The larger this domain, the healthier the culture.

Which brings us to American thought since the 19th-century. During this 200-year period, the two outer domains have been steadily encroaching on the middle domain. The result is the domain of obedience to the unenforceable has been shrinking. Moulton warned of this.

² “Law and Manners,” published in *The Atlantic*, June 24, 1924.

Absolute Choice and the Shrinking Middle Domain

Moulton said the first movement emphasizes “liberty.” This turns “Free Choice” into “Absolute Choice.” Moulton saw this developing mainly in the business world, where the claim was that self-regulating markets, led by an “invisible hand,” would prove beneficial to all. We see this today in financialization, the tendency to emphasize individual wealth maximization. But individualized economic prosperity isn’t in the public interest, as it doesn’t generally trickle all the way down to those at the bottom.



Absolute Choice emerged in the Western world with the Enlightenment of 500 years ago. *Dare to think for yourself!* was its battle cry. Thus, the *choosing, rational individual* was imagined as the best resource for a flourishing society—and for the faith, for with the Enlightenment, American Christianity embraced Absolute Choice. But absolutizing anything other than God makes it an idol for our destruction (Hos.8:4). The destruction was the church as a mediating institution, for *autonomy means a law unto myself. I am the final judge.*

G. K. Chesterton recognized this. “It is the fashion to talk of institutions as cold and cramping things.”³ Others have written how the American faith community is “overcritical of the general idea of institutions—as if those who come to Christ are restored to the simplicity of an Eden-like existence that needs no structures or organizations.”⁴ Laura Winner agrees. An American historian, author and Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, she describes American Christianity as “famously hostile to institutions.”

This hostility is why, by the middle of the 20th century, American Christianity’s relevance was restricted to the individual Christian’s private interests. Churches shrunk from being *mediating* institutions to *mop-up*—to “individual voluntary activities, missions of mercy to the poor, the homeless, the addicted. Worthy as these projects may be,” writes University of Notre Dame professor Christian Smith, “none of them attempt to transform social or cultural systems, but merely to alleviate some of the harm caused by the existing system.”⁵

But this is only half of what Moulton saw developing in 1921. On the opposite side of the sphere, a second movement was developing. It too shrunk the middle domain of obedience to unenforceable.

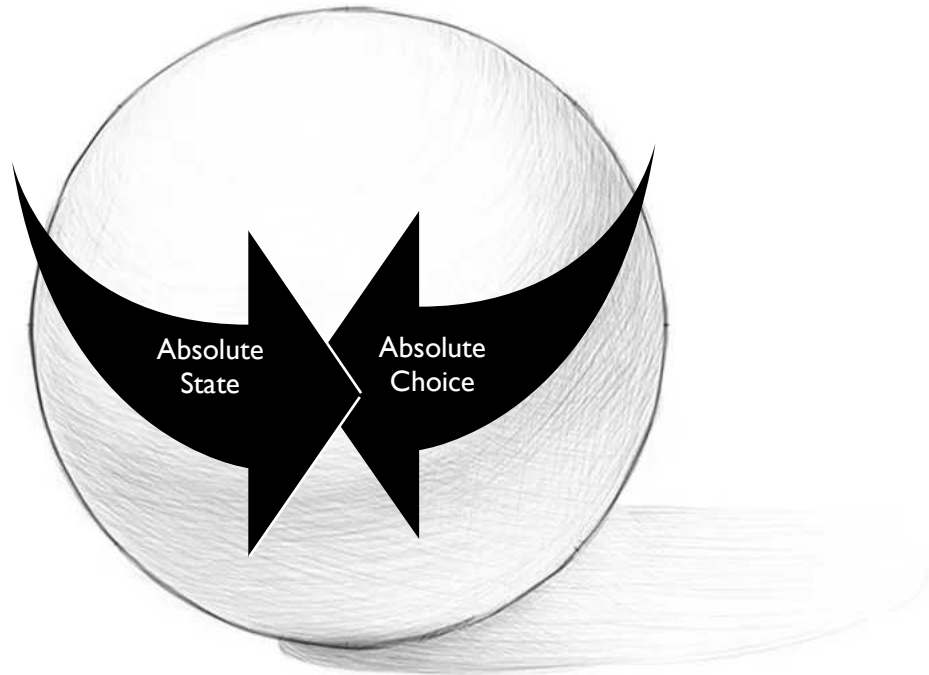
³ G. K. Chesterton and Iain T. Benson, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Volume VII* (Ignatius Press, 2004), 286.

⁴ Alonzo L. McDonald, “The Grand Inquisitor Lives—Idolatry in Organizations and Management,” from *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, edited by Os Guinness and John Seel (Moody Press, 1992), 138.

⁵ Christian Smith et al, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 201, 198.

Absolute State and the Shrinking Middle Domain

Moulton saw a second movement seeking to absolutize Positive Law by emphasizing “Justice.” Its proponents sought to have “Positive Law” encroach on every aspect of society—what could be considered “Absolute State.” Here, a benevolent ever-expanding state would prove wise in redistributing the greedy gain of capitalists. In Absolute State, an ever-expanding class of educated elites shrinks the middle domain.



This became known as Progressivism, creeping into mainline churches in the late 1800s. But Progressives have a “soft and shallow concept of human nature” and an “unwarranted optimism about man.”⁶ They exhibit a hubris in believing redistribution yields equity, justice. This however encroaches on the middle domain as real justice is not simply taking from those who *have* and giving it to those who *don't* (c.f., Luke 10:7).

Absolute Choice and Absolute State explain why American Christianity has fallen prey to the idols of “pragmatism, progressivism, and politicization.”⁷ *Pragmatism* is “the Individualist”—the “practical” visionary who’s highly relational, rallying individuals around a cause. *Progressivism* is when some individuals recognize relational capital alone doesn’t yield sufficient cultural capital to be taken seriously. So they turn to the state, becoming *politicized*, making the coercive power of the state the final arbiter within most of social life.

The result? “For all the talk of world-changing and all of the good intentions that motivate it, the Christian community is not, on the whole, remotely close to a position where it could actually change the world in any significant way.”⁸ That’s because it’s politicized, and a politicized Christian community cannot serve as a mediating institution. The Right relies on Absolute Choice while Left relies on Absolute State. Both encroach on the domain of obedience to the unenforceable, threatening our experiment in self-government.

What then is the way forward? Many are looking to neuroscience.

⁶ Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 95.

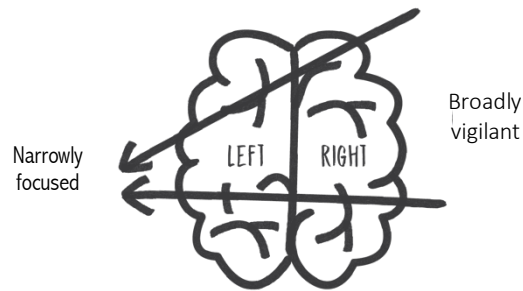
⁷ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford, 2010), 163.

⁸ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, 274.

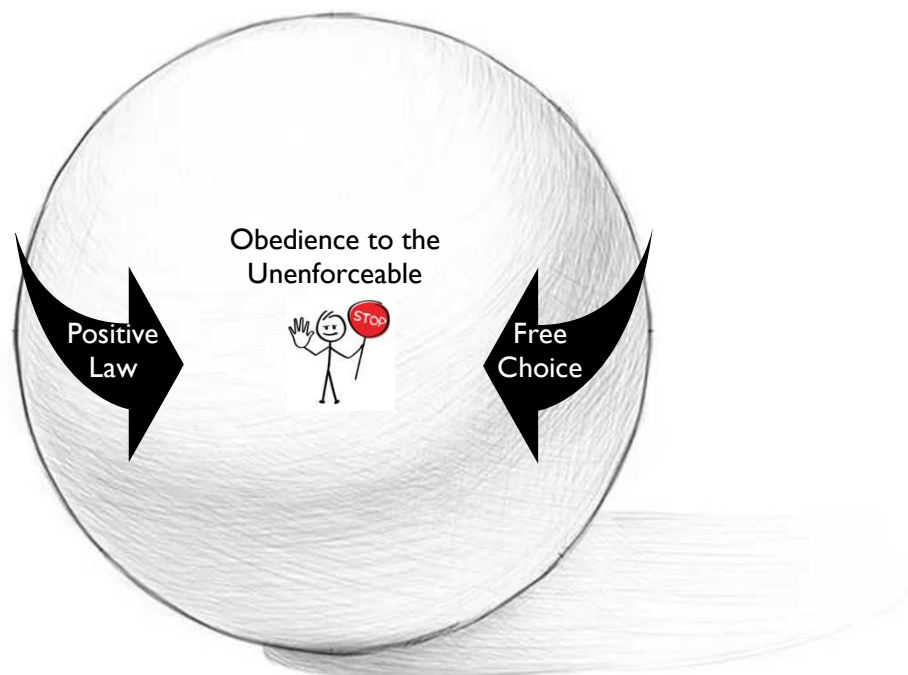
The Way Forward Neuroscience depicts the problem

It's worth noting the number of evangelical scholars (N. T. Wright and James K. A. Smith for example) turning to neuroscience as the way forward in our post-Christian age. Wright and Smith in particular point to the work of Iain McGilchrist, hailing his 2010 book, *The Master and His Emissary*. Wright calls it "magisterial."

It's magisterial for it explains how American Christianity got into this mess. It's related to how the brain's two hemispheres pay attention to the world in two different ways. The right is broadly vigilant. It thinks in metaphor, seeing the bigger picture. It's good at *making sense* of things—like America's Great Experiment.



Those who bias their right hemisphere pay attention to how Tocqueville's image of a flourishing democracy overlaps with Moulton's three domains in a self-governing society. Indeed, those who pay attention to the world via their right brain see how both *make sense* of America's experiment in self-government.



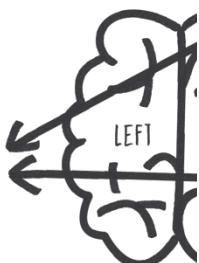
Those who bias the left hemisphere don't. The left is narrowly focused. Those who bias the left hemisphere find it difficult to pay attention to the big picture depicting America's experiment in self-government. And therein lies the rub. Upward of 95 percent of the Western world's population biases the left hemisphere. In biasing the left brain, 95 percent of the Christian community sees a narrow picture of society.

Narrowing the focus has its advantages. Those who bias the left hemisphere are good at *making* things. It might be a movement, a business, a product, for the left hemisphere biases being “practical,” activist, get-it-done.

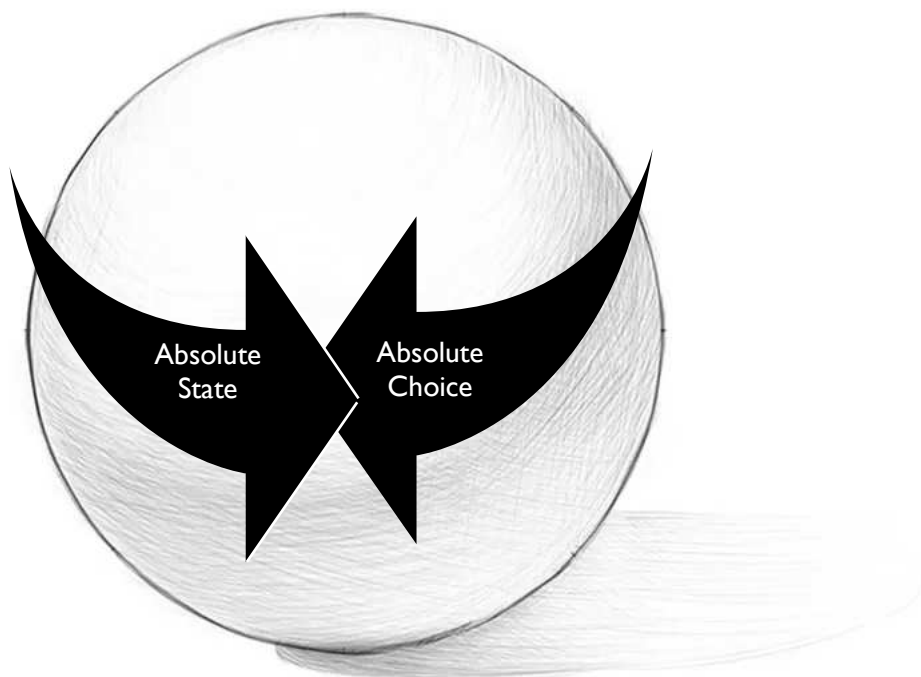
But the left hemisphere tends to *go-it-alone* on getting things done by working apart from the right hemisphere, that half of the brain which widens the lens (McGilchrist calls the right hemisphere “prophetic”). This describes 95 percent of the Western world, resulting in individualistic, pragmatic, progressive, politicized churches.

Privatized
Progressive
Politicized
Absolute Choice
Absolute State

Narrowly
focused



These churches cannot serve as mediating institutions. They’re marginalized, and a marginalized community is relegated to *mop-up*—helping the poor, the marginalized, immigrants, and so on. And while these populations of course have infinite value, the most effective way to help them requires more than individualized missions of mercy or an ever-expanding state. It requires obedience to the unenforceable, what mediating institutions alone can cultivate—and what marginalized American churches cannot do.



But they could, if the church returned to the ancient gospel. That’s grist for a future little booklet.

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