THE AFTER PARTY

TOWARD BETTER CHRISTIAN POLITICS

CURTIS CHANG AND NANCY FRENCH

Based on the project created by

CURTIS CHANG • DAVID FRENCH • RUSSELL MOORE

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INTRODUCTION

A COMPLICATED QUESTION

"Why don't we see Grandma and Grandpa anymore?"

The question hung in the air.

Sean and Emily exchanged that awkward side glance that parents use when each spouse wants the other to answer.

The Harris family, which included two high school girls and another in college, were on vacation in Costa Rica. It was raining, and the five of them were all cooped up together in the rental car. There was nothing to do and they couldn't avoid each other. This combination of boredom and compression can sometimes surface simmering questions that a family normally avoids.

The girls were asking about Sean's parents, Jack and Cindy. The grandparents lived in Oregon, a twelve-hour drive from the Bay Area home of Sean and Emily. While growing up, the girls most often saw their grandparents when Sean and Emily traveled to Jack and Cindy's home to commemorate special events: graduation parties, birthday parties, and holiday parties. But several years ago, in 2020, those trips had suddenly disappeared.

"I miss them," the youngest daughter added softly.

The only sound was the steady patter of the tropical rain on the car roof. Sean finally broke the silence: "Well, girls . . . um . . . it's complicated."

Then he stopped. Partly, Sean was stalling for time. But it was also the truth: for both him and Emily, it *was* complicated, very complicated.

A simplistic answer that Sean could have offered would have been "Political differences." This answer would have conveyed a grain of truth. Jack and Cindy held conservative political beliefs and Sean and Emily now held views that would be characterized as comparatively more liberal. Such an answer treats political difference as a story of *what*: "What did Sean and Emily believe? What did Jack and Cindy believe? What was the conflict between these two political positions?" Sean could have told the girls this kind of story quickly—and in the process he would have utterly failed to explain the real reasons they no longer saw their grandparents.

Because the fuller story is a more complicated story of *how*: How did everyone involved come to believe what they believed? How did they talk with one another about politics? How did those interactions shape everyone's feelings about one another?

This *how* story more truly explains the disappearing connection within the Harris family and within many American families like them. To understand this more complicated kind of story, one must dig deeper than present-day political positions.

For instance, take the family histories of Jack and Cindy. Both come from families who lived for generations in small towns in Northern California and Oregon where almost everyone was White, Republican, and conservative Christian. They stayed so completely within this environment that, like fish who know only water, they did not have even a theoretical conception that people could grow up in different racial or political environments. Jack admits, "Looking back, most of our Christian friends were from the conservative side. But at the time, I didn't even know there were [politically] conservative or liberal Christians. I thought we were just Christians. I didn't have much experience with diversity." To this day, Cindy struggles to grasp how this homogeneity affected her, so much so that the concept does not have a place in her vocabulary: "I still don't even know what that word *homogenous* means. Looking for differences wasn't even on my radar."

Sean was raised in this environment and, like his parents, knew of no other kind of world. The family eventually moved from their small town to a suburb of Sacramento. Here, pockets of cultural and political liberalism existed, especially in the community college where Jack taught as a math professor, and also in the local public-school system. Jack sometimes complained about the political correctness at the college, but he couldn't do anything about that. He and Cindy could do something about their kids' education, however. When Sean's oldest brother was in the fourth grade, his parents pulled the

boys out of public school and put them into a conservative Christian school.

Sean remembers his father listening regularly to the conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh. Over family dinners, Jack would rehearse Limbaugh's latest takes on taxes, foreign policy, and the Clintons. Sean and his brothers would eat while listening, nodding in agreement. Jack admits that he didn't have time for other news programs, so there were no other regular sources of information influencing these family discussions.

Sean deeply respected and trusted his father. He sought his father's acceptance. Like many children, he sensed that gaining this acceptance meant agreeing with what his father believed. "Who my dad was, who we were as his sons, and who we were as a Christian family," says Sean, "was bound up in what our shared politics were."

Sean left home for college, attending Cal Poly. At this large state university, he was suddenly confronted with the diversity that composes the entire state of California. Sean joined the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship campus group and for the first time befriended fellow believers who held very different political views from his. On a summer service project in Mexico, he met faithful Christians with entirely different cultural perspectives from his own.

During college, Sean didn't necessarily change his own politics. His father's views were still imprinted on him from those years of dinnertime conversations. But his assumption

that Christian identity should equate to conservative politics was weakening.

Accelerating this shift was his relationship with Emily, a fellow member of the Christian fellowship. Emily was a fourth-generation Japanese American with a long family history in California. In 1942, Emily's grandparents were rounded up from their family farm and imprisoned in a concentration camp in Amache, Colorado. Emily's mom was born surrounded by barbed wire. When her family was finally released, they had lost practically everything and had to start over as farmworkers. This history instilled in Emily a keen sympathy with those who have been excluded by our country and a sensitivity to the legacy of systemic injustice.

In 1997, Sean and Emily got married and moved to the Bay Area. Sean started as an engineer in Silicon Valley. Emily began working as a public-school teacher, then a school counselor, where she pursued her passion to reform educational practices that disproportionately hurt immigrant Latino students. Sean and Emily were active in their local evangelical church and were raising three daughters. Emily was the main organizer of the family schedule, and she made sure that, even with the typical busyness of a young family, they made regular trips to visit Sean's family. Emily's side of the family lived nearby in the Bay Area, and it was important to Emily that the girls grew up knowing both sets of their grandparents.

Emily especially grew in her affection for Jack, in particular

his virtues of integrity and earnestness. But her appreciation of his character ran into painful experiences with his political views. On one visit in the aftermath of 9/11, Jack read an email that was circulating through the Harris family about the threat of Muslim terrorists in the US. "We need to keep a better eye on them," he read. "We shouldn't be afraid to gather them up in one place if we need to. We've done it before as a country, like we did with the Japanese." Emily stared at him in disbelief, unsure if he had just forgotten about her family history or, worse, if he hadn't. She quickly excused herself, ran to the upstairs bathroom, and sobbed.

After she returned home, she composed an eight-page letter to Jack and Cindy, explaining why the experience was so painful. Jack responded by calling Emily and leaving on her voicemail a heartfelt message of apology.

But the pattern persisted. Emily would visit Sean's parents, and within a day or two the family conversation would turn to politics and she would hear some viewpoint expressed that seemed to ignore her reality as the only non-White and non-conservative member of the family. She tried to convey to them that their limited family time would be better spent talking about what was happening in their kids' or their own personal lives. Jack admitted to her that, temperamentally, he was much more comfortable talking about issues than connecting on emotionally intimate matters—and for him, this meant talking about political issues. Looking back, Jack also

recognizes that he wasn't adept at picking up emotional cues. He admits with an admirable level of humility: "I'm not a very good listener—it's something I know I need to work on, but I'm still not very good at it."

Jack tried to adjust. Emily would experience a brief trend where family conversations would steer clear of politics, only for the painful dynamic inevitably to resume. Emily struggled to make sense of it all. Was Jack just unable to realize when he was straying back into the very territory that was most emotionally comfortable for him—and most emotionally threatening to Emily? Or perhaps, as she feared, was Jack actually far more committed to his politics than to her as a person?

Her fears extended to the other members of the Harris family. At a family gathering in Sacramento, one of Sean's brothers complained to Emily about immigrants needing special treatment from schools. "If they don't want to work hard, we should just let them fail," he said. Emily interpreted that as a personal attack on her life's calling and decided she needed to protect herself emotionally. By 2018, Emily determined not to make any more trips to visit Jack and Cindy.

She and Sean tried to shield their daughters from the painful conflict. Sean took the girls on a few trips by himself. Yet the dinnertime conversations grew more and more tense, and Sean felt that his girls were starting to be included in barbs about liberals. Finally, at the end of one especially tense visit near the 2020 election, Sean snapped at Jack with more force

than he can remember ever expressing to his father, "You're always trying to set me straight!"

Sean was not proud of that moment, because he could tell the comment hurt his dad.

"I was at a boiling point, unable to explain all my feelings, which had many layers," Sean later explained. "I think I'm just starting to realize that my dad was engaging in our political conversations from a place of relational security. For him, he was just talking about the issues, and that's it, that's all that was happening. When he would express disdain for a view I held, he was targeting just that view. For me, I was engaging from a place of insecurity. I felt I was being implicitly compared to my brother, who always had my dad's respect. I feared that my changing politics had made me the black sheep of the family. I wasn't sure I was still accepted. I was afraid that he disdained me personally."

After this last exchange, all family visits to Oregon ended. Emily continued to organize the family graduation, birthday, and family parties but did not invite Sean's parents. And they didn't seem to express any desire to visit. The momentum of everyone's lives was taking them farther and farther apart.

Except now, in this rental car in Costa Rica, the daughters were asking the question: "Why don't we see Grandma and Grandpa anymore?"

The Harris story illustrates that the *what* story—of differing ideologies, parties, and policies—fails to adequately answer

such a question. For most relationships that have disappeared or are at risk of disappearing, there is a far more important story of *how*. The Harris story is a story of how Cindy's homogenous background ill prepared her for recognizing how others differ from her. It is a story of how Jack feels emotionally safer debating political issues than connecting on a more intimate relational level. It is a story of how Emily's own background makes her especially sensitive to exclusion. It is a story of how Sean is still coming to terms with his complicated family dynamics.

Moving from the simplistic *what* toward the more complicated—and more truthful—*how* story of politics is the purpose of this book. We believe this move is especially critical for Christians to adopt because in Christian families, friendships, and churches we are increasingly disappearing from each other.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Who has disappeared from your life because of politics?

Perhaps you, too, have experienced complicated feelings around this question. Perhaps you have picked up this book because, for whatever reason, you think it might finally be time to address it.

Do this quick exercise. On a separate piece of paper, write down the people who have disappeared from your life because of political tension.

Here are some prompts:

- Whom do you no longer see at church, either because they've left or you've left?
- Whose texts have you stopped getting because you blocked them for the offensive links that they shared?
- When you go to another city, is there a local friend or family member you no longer try to see because you fear that even a catch-up conversation could turn to current events?
- Who has disappeared from your social media feed because their posts and comments were so disagreeable?
- Which family members have stopped showing up at Thanksgiving or Christmas because of a past conflict or simmering tension about politics?
- Whom have you stopped inviting to your parties? Whose parties are you no longer invited to?

After you've written down your list of names,

review it and think of the people behind those names. What are your feelings? Circle each word that resonates with you, and add any not on this list.

- anger
- sadness
- affection
- guilt
- curiosity
- revulsion
- insecurity
- obsession
- resentment
- confusion
- outrage
- powerlessness
- (fill in the blank)

THE DISAPPEARED ONES

The emotions are complicated, aren't they? They are complicated because behind each name is a complicated individual story. And all of those complicated individual stories contribute to a complicated national story.

Right now, in the United States, we're in the middle of something that journalist Bill Bishop has termed "the Big Sort." Americans are moving to locations or increasingly living in locations where they're surrounded by people who share their same beliefs. We have forgotten how to disagree with our neighbors, because we no longer live near people with whom

we disagree. Millions of Americans are now less likely to live near people they disagree with than at any other time in recent memory or since researchers have been tracking this statistic.

Moving to be with people of like mind is not necessarily wrong. Families move from one location to another for myriad reasons. Sometimes it's just easier and more comfortable to live in a place that reflects your values. But ideological isolation comes at a cost, to ourselves and to our society.

Many readers will be able to do this exercise and fill their lists with people who disappeared from their lives because of politics. But some readers may struggle to come up with any names. If that is your case—if all your relationships are as intact as before, untouched by politics—this may mean the Big Sort got to you early. You have been a longtime participant (consciously or unconsciously) in it, which has already made the politically different disappear from your neighborhood, workplace, church, and even extended family. If so, it means you are relatively insulated from the immediate pain experienced by Sean and Emily. But you are even more vulnerable to the kind of long-term dynamics that shaped Jack and Cindy. If diversity was never present in your life, you will struggle to understand others who are different from you and to navigate a national context defined by difference. Homogeneity will make your relationships easier, but it will also make you much more vulnerable to political extremism (and this is true regardless of where you are on the political spectrum). Lilliana Mason, author of *Uncivil Agreement:*

How Politics Became Our Identity, summarizes the research: "A lack of exposure to other ideas and people can make other ideas seem extreme and other people seem totally foreign, even when they are not. This includes both an intolerance of the policy positions of the other side and, more basically, an intolerance of the increasing strangeness of the outsiders. It can make a relatively moderate person intolerant of other views."[1]

We'll further examine this vulnerability later in the book, but the point is this: the people who do not appear in your life still affect you, even if you don't consciously feel the pain of a relational loss.

We are all haunted by the disappeared ones.

The term *the disappeared ones* echoes the political history of another country. Following this echo reminds us that this kind of social disappearance can affect more than just those of us immediately involved; over time and in aggregate, the loss of relationships across political lines can influence the fate of an entire society. In 1970s Argentina, the government's secret police abducted individuals suspected of holding dissident political views. Later investigation revealed many were executed secretly by those security forces. But at the time, no explanation was given for what happened to them or if they might return. The victims became known as *los desaparecidos*: "the disappeared ones."

Americans tend to resist considering how our politics may

1. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 61–62.

echo the politics of distant countries like Argentina; thus, borrowing a term like *the disappeared ones* for our context can feel dissonant. We think, *Secret police disappearing people? That could never happen here!* And, of course, there is still a large gap between Americans socially separating themselves from political opponents and Argentinians physically eliminating their political opponents.

But a pathway runs between these two kinds of disappearance. The systematic violence against *los desaparecidos* did not appear out of nowhere overnight. The path was laid by intensifying political polarization between Argentina's version of Left versus Right in preceding years, a trend that severed relationships of all kinds. Scholars have studied how societies like Argentina's end up descending into violence and have pointed out this consistent pattern: widening relational separation between groups intensifies political conflict, which in turn increases broader societal vulnerability to political violence.[2] For example, one statistical study showed that democracies where people feel high levels of politically motivated animosity are 34 percent more likely to suffer political violence.[3] The connection between relational division and political violence makes intuitive sense when you ponder the basic question "How do you get to the point

2. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Anchor, 2021).
3. James A. Piazza, "Political Polarization and Political Violence" (June 1, 2022). *Security Studies* (2023). Forthcoming. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4156980 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4156980.

where one group of citizens can contemplate physically harming another group of citizens?" This happens only if those two groups are socially separated into an *us* and a *them*. Once *them* no longer appear in the social lives of *us*, it becomes easier to dehumanize them. Add in the fear, often stoked by political leaders, that "they are out to get us," and the situation grows more volatile. The collective desire to eliminate *them* intensifies, and so does the temptation to resort to violence to complete the disappearing act.

We are not claiming that America is on the imminent verge of descending into systemic political violence. The route running from widespread relational separation to increased political violence can take decades to traverse. But momentum builds with every passing year. There are many signs that in our country the gap is closing between the two kinds of disappearance, as the impact of severed relationships increases willingness to sever lives altogether. As the Big Sort deepens here in the United States, surveys of American political attitudes show a marked rise in openness to political violence. Public support for the use of force against members of Congress nearly doubled from January to June of 2023, according to a study published by the University of Chicago's Project on Security and Threats.[4] As of June 26, 2023, an estimated 44 million people supported using violence to coerce lawmakers. Democrats had the largest

4. Julia Shapero, "Five Percent of Americans Say Force Justified to Put Trump Back in Office: Poll," *The Hill*, September 28, 2022, www.thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/3664721-5-percent-of-americans-say-force-justified-to-put-trump-back-in-office-poll/.

increase: in January, 7 percent of Democrats supported using political violence against lawmakers; by June, this had climbed to 16 percent. Eighteen percent of all Republican respondents endorse the use of force against lawmakers.[5] In 2021, 81 percent of local officials reported being on the receiving end of harassment, threats, or violence.[6] Some 20 percent of Democrats (approximately 12.6 million voters) and 16 percent of Republicans (approximately 7.9 million voters) believe America would be better off if large numbers of their opposition died.[7] More than 42 percent of Americans view people in the opposing political party as "downright evil."[8]

These are historically high numbers that should alarm us all. It is quite likely that these numbers will be even higher during the next election season, as Americans continue to add to their list of the disappeared ones.

The comparison between our current state in America and Argentina's in the 1970s should fill us with both hope and humility. There is hope: currently, we have not descended into wholesale violence, and our political institutions and practices,

5. Shapero, "Force Justified."
6. "New Report: Harassment, Threats and Violence Directed at Local Elected Officials Rising at an Alarming Rate," National League of Cities, November 10, 2021, www.nlc.org/post/2021/11/10/new-report-harassment-threats-and-violence-directed-at-local-elected-officials-rising-at-an-alarming-rate/.
7. Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, "Lethal Mass Partisanship: Prevalence, Correlates, & Electoral Contingencies," Danny Hayes (website), accessed December 12, 2023, www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe___mason_ncapsa_2019_-_lethal_partisanship_-_final_lmedit.pdf.
8. Kalmoe and Mason, "Lethal Mass Partisanship."

such as our history of the peaceful transfer of political power, are stronger than they were in Argentina. But we also need humility. The events of January 6, 2021, revealed how even that bulwark is threatened. As a country, we now have a very recent experience of a violent insurrection, stirred by an outgoing president who consciously mobilized the us-versus-them mentality to resist the peaceful transfer of power. The violence of events like the January 6 insurrection should warn us that we are not exempt from what has befallen many other countries. We are stumbling—and in some cases running—farther down the path to violent conflict. We need to recognize that there is a point when it becomes too late to turn around.

We are voluntarily creating a class of vilified Americans—the disappeared ones—whom we otherwise loved, whom we otherwise respected. Either we are shunning them or we are vanishing purposefully and permanently from their lives. They are disappearing. We have disappeared. And our loved ones are left wondering if they'll ever see us again. Individually, we need to make a change to reverse the relational losses in our own lives. Collectively, we need to make a change to prevent a broader catastrophic loss of our democracy.

We need to reclaim hope rather than resign ourselves to the current state of affairs. Why? Because *we* are doing this to each other. There is no secret police out there doing this to us. We have the power to choose a different path. We can stop the disappearance.

We also need to adopt humility. Why? Because *we* are doing this to each other. The change must start with each one of us, especially for those of us who follow Jesus. With some faithful effort, we can move toward a better Christian politics.

THE FIRST STEPS

Humility can feed our hope. If we are willing to listen humbly for echoes between our situation and the history of other countries, we can also pick up notes of hope. The story of *los desaparecidos* hints at the first steps we can take. On April 30, 1977, thirteen mothers of disappeared individuals linked arms and walked into the Plaza de Mayo in the capital city of Buenos Aires. They bore on placards the names and photographs of their children. They were determined not to simply let their identities fade from view. Every subsequent Thursday, these mothers joined together, with more and more grieving mothers of *los desaparecidos* gathering. As the mothers walked through the plaza, they chanted the names of the missing. They grieved the losses. These weekly marches swelled to thousands. They became a political force known as the Mothers of the Plaza and gained international prominence. Sting wrote a song about them called "They Dance Alone (*Cueca Solo*)," and U2 honored these grieving women in a *Joshua Tree* song called "Mothers of the Disappeared." What is remarkable about their story—and the relevant analogy for us today—is how this transformation

began with the modest steps of naming, remembering, and grieving. Their steps provide a clue for how we can begin to address our disappearance.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

You can take these same steps right now: naming, remembering, and grieving.

1. Naming: Look back over your list and slowly read each name out loud. As you do, invite the Holy Spirit to guide your feelings. Try to discern whether a particular name tugs at you.

2. Remembering: With that one name, ask the Holy Spirit to help you call that person to mind. What does he or she look like? How did you meet this person? What is your favorite memory of this person? What traits did you especially appreciate? And, yes, try to remember the painful events that led up to this person's disappearance from your life.

3. Grieving: If you feel able and willing, ask the Holy Spirit to help you locate your grief associated with this person. Grief is the recognition of the loss combined with the longing for that person. Pay special attention to that sense of longing.

As you go through these steps, resist the pressure to do something active right away. Experience these feelings. Sit with them. You may want to go through these steps over the course of multiple days. Give the time needed for each of these steps of naming, remembering, and grieving, because they build up to the next big step: hope.

You don't need to rush to hope right now. The Holy Spirit will help you experience hope when it is appropriate for you. But the question to ponder now is this: amid political conflict and relational carnage, what exactly are we supposed to hope for?

The Mothers of the Plaza give us another hint. When they took their first steps, some of them undoubtedly held on to the hope that they could still be reunited to their disappeared ones. They needed that initial hope to get started, and you may need it as well. Compared to the Mothers of the Plaza, you of course have so much more reason to hope for a reunion, because these conflicts haven't gotten horribly violent yet. Many of the people on your list of disappeared ones are probably still alive. You still have time.

But the amount of time for a reunion in our lifetime is not infinite. Around the time of their Costa Rica vacation, Emily discovered that several of her close friends had received

life-threatening medical diagnoses. She started to imagine what it would feel like if she got the news that Jack and Cindy were ill.

Emily's close friend then shared with her how a broken family relationship was finally restored after eighteen years. The example gave her hope that God really could restore broken relationships. "But I also realized that Jack and Cindy could very well be dead if we waited eighteen years—a point of no return."

Unbeknownst to Sean and Emily, their eldest daughter was praying with her college friends for a reconciliation between her grandparents and parents. Meanwhile, Sean had felt God leading him through his own version of naming, remembering, and grieving. These steps were stirring hope in him. Sean and Emily then sought counsel and prayer from their church small group and finally decided to make another trip to Oregon to try to reconcile with Jack and Cindy. In preparation for the visit, Sean and Emily made a long list of the issues to address. Sean tucked the piece of paper, bulleted and categorized, inside a tote bag.

When Jack and Cindy opened the door, they moved toward Sean and Emily and embraced them with a warmth that surprised Emily. As she returned the hug, she could feel the physical frailty in her aging in-laws: there really were only so many years they had left together. She felt a surge of compassion and love for them. "It was like a spell had hidden all this love," Emily recounts, "and in our embrace, that spell suddenly got broken."

Later that weekend, the four of them talked about what

each had felt in the past few years. Jack and Cindy listened closely with tears welling up in their eyes. "I did not realize all of that was happening for you," Cindy lamented. "I just thought you didn't want us around." Each side could verbalize to the other what everyone most needed to hear: their relationships with each other mattered far more than the substance of their political differences.

During the weekend, their conversation never really dived into the specifics of the issues—the specific *what* that had divided them. None of the Harrises changed their political beliefs, none stopped caring about politics, and none disavowed their political allegiances. But *how* they moved toward each other was enough. For Sean and Emily, how Jack and Cindy had embraced them was enough; for Jack and Cindy, how Sean and Emily had made the effort to see them was enough. Sean never took out the list from his tote bag.

The Harris story is a hopeful one indeed. And we have more such stories to share. But we also need to be honest with you. We cannot guarantee the story of your estranged relationship will end with a Harris-style reunion, even if you hope for it and take further steps to pursue such an outcome. Tragically, politics *can* kill off relationships for a lifetime.

The Mothers of the Plaza discovered this tragic truth. As the years went on, it became apparent to most of the women that a happy reunion was highly unlikely. Most of them would not even get the bodies of their loved ones returned to them.

Yet the Mothers of the Plaza still took their steps together every Thursday. They could do so only because as they walked, they had begun to lift their hope to something higher. They longed for some future—which maybe they could not even precisely articulate—that incorporated their very real pain into a greater meaning. They longed for redemption.

Redemption is when pain does not necessarily disappear but it does lead to transformation. For the mothers, in their hope for redemption, they themselves were transformed. They started out as uncertain, confused, and isolated women; they ended up as a powerful political movement. Their country was also transformed. The Mothers of the Plaza ultimately helped to end the nation's political violence and also restored to many thousands of families the truth (and even, in a few cases, the bodily remains) of those who had disappeared. Argentina today has its share of struggles (political polarization hasn't disappeared), but it is a much, much better place than it was when the mothers first started their walk.

Christian hope is the hope for redemption. Though we cannot guarantee that all your broken relationships will be made whole in your lifetime, we can promise that if you seek God in the process, you will be transformed. As you follow Jesus and submit your politics to him, you will be changed into the very image of our Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). God intends this transformation for every disciple of Jesus. And so we can confidently ask God to grow our hope for our own transformation.

This kind of hope is "an anchor for the soul" that, amid the conflicting currents of Right and Left, keeps us truly centered on Jesus (Heb. 6:19).

As people in the process of being transformed by God, we can genuinely offer hope to others. We can model a way out of the finger-pointing and fist shaking that dominates our political culture. Instead of insisting that the other side must change, we can humbly demonstrate how God changes us and look for ways to be reconciled. Wouldn't that be a hopeful, redemptive message to the world?

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is meant as a companion volume to *The After Party* video course. We encourage readers to engage with the course (see the information at the end of the book) and read this book before, during, or after doing the video version because the two are meant to complement each other. The video course, in particular, is designed to be experienced with other people—in small groups at church, in Sunday school, with a group in your neighborhood, or even with just one other person. And the book and video course can be engaged with simultaneously or in any sequence: you can read the book first to ascertain whether your group is ready for the course, or your group can do the course first and then together read the book to go deeper. It's important, however, to tackle this material

with others to combat one of the biggest underlying problems: our isolation and division from one another.

This message will be most useful to those seeking relationships with one another. Indeed, we need the support of friends and companions, which is a common theme in the stories of hope we share in this book: the Mothers of the Plaza linking arms, Emily and Sean seeking counsel from their small group, and other stories you'll read in the following pages.

At the same time, we also recognize that some Christians are not currently involved in a small group community. A good number of Christians in recent years have left church altogether, often because of political tensions. We've written this book for you as well, to help you consider a path back to Christian community, whether that is a reunion with old friends or finding new ones. We are not meant to walk alone.

The After Party itself is the product of a particular set of deep friendships. At the core is Curtis Chang, David French, and Russell Moore. We've also included voices from our network of friendships that encompass even more diversity along racial, gender, theological, and political lines. We recognize we do not represent the full diversity of American Christianity and that we do not have all the answers (or even most of them!). The church will surely need many other messages and messengers to address the complexity of our current challenges.

We are certain that every reader will finish this book with the thought "But you didn't cover X!" This book does not

presume to have arrived at the answers that comprehensively define Christian politics. We are about movement, not arrival. As our subtitle indicates, our goal is to help us get moving *toward* something better. We ourselves are journeying as a group of friends—and we are glad that you have decided to join us.

We need better Christian politics. "Better" doesn't mean we need to change our political views. But it does mean we need to change our hearts. "Better" doesn't mean we should stop caring about political issues. But it does mean we need to care more about the people who have disappeared. It's not too late. It's not hopeless. The time to start is now.