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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”
— Romans 12:2

“Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.” (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church’s history. Christianity is moving from its historical centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled, to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus’s time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high Middle Ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation, and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

Introduction to Political Theology and Theological Method

We all come to this book and topic with various positions, competing loyalties, divisions, passions, and senses of justice. But we also all come with practical questions of many kinds:

1. What do I do when my church is tearing itself apart about this or that politicized issue?
2. Which issues are most important?
3. Should I vote and how?
4. How should our local church engage with the civic leaders of our town?
5. What is the place of political identity within the church?
6. What is the role of the church within America or any other modern secular nation?
7. What hope is there for the church to make a kingdom impact when its voice keeps shrinking in influence?

And countless other political questions.

This book doesn't answer those questions directly. Instead, it is designed to resource you and your church's thinking about these questions. This resource primarily works by using a *theological method* for considering practical or strategic questions. This method works by starting with the facts, data, and foundational beliefs. For example we might rightly assert "Christ alone is king" and "Scripture alone is the authoritative word¹ of God." And true as these are, they are but one voice in a conversation. The church exists within a world that neither acknowledges Christ as king, nor Scripture as the word of God.

So, the church must engage in conversation with those who hold power and those who are powerless. To do so, the church must understand the world's authority structures and foundational beliefs. Likewise, to make any kind of strategic decision in the world requires understanding how the world works. So, the theological method begins by researching and stating the foundational positions, engaging these in a conversation, and finally coming to some practical actions at the end. We can summarize this three part process as "what?", "so what?", and "now what?"

"What?" First, we talk about *foundations*. We acknowledge the sources that are feeding into the challenges of our time in the church—Scripture, theological tradition, and our worldly context. Each of these sources is given the podium to offer foundational truths and facts.

¹ Throughout this book and other ECO resources generally, we do not capitalize "word of God" except in direct reference to Jesus Christ. This is to distinguish between the written word and the Word incarnate.

Though the world is not an authority the church recognizes, it is essential to know what the world believes about itself and about the church.

“So what?” Second, we discuss *implications*. We combine these conversations in part one, see where there are conflicts, where there are surprising agreements, and where the church needs to re-confess our submission to the authority of Scripture in contrast to the pressures of the world.

“Now what?” or “How?” Third, we begin to address *applications*. The applications section rarely offers hard and fast conclusions. Rather, our hope is that this book would initiate and continue conversations within church settings, rather than authoritative answers. We believe that the process of engaging in a conversation between Scripture, theological tradition, and the formative voices in the world is something that needs to happen in every one of our questions about politics and we hope that this book will inspire you to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Part I: Foundations

Section I: Biblical Foundations

Chapter 1

Basic Biblical Foundations

Rev. Michael Thornton

In order to arrive at a conversation on political engagement, the church must first know and move from some basic biblical foundations.

Jesus is King. Jesus is the king of the people of God. The Old Testament prophesies to the kingship of Jesus in Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."¹ In his discourse with Pilate, Jesus claims that his kingdom is not from this world.² Then, after Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension to the Father, Jesus gives John the revelation that he is the "King of kings and Lord of lords."³ Jesus is not just a king, but it is of no little importance that before, during, and after the earthly ministry of Jesus, one key way that Christ is described is that of Jesus our King.

The kingdom of Jesus. At the end of the gospel message, King Jesus declares that he holds all authority,⁴ but also that he is moving his location for a time and will then return. Jesus gives more words to his return when he visits John in the book of Revelation. So the kingdom has been inaugurated, but has yet to be fully consummated.

This kingdom is marked by the presence of lesser kingdoms, the mixing of the "wheat and the tares,"⁵ trials and tribulations, and wars and rumors of wars.⁶ And too, the fully inaugurated kingdom is marked by God's Spirit dwelling with every true believer, the spread of the gospel, and is a season of grace whereby the triune God is displaying tremendous patience and steadfast love, not desiring that any should perish.⁷ Indeed, these days are marked by the continuous baptisms of new believers, those who were previously walking in darkness, but who have now in recent days seen the light of Christ and responded in true faith. In other words,

¹ See also Micah 5:2–5.

² John 18:28–40.

³ Revelation 19:16.

⁴ Matthew 28:18.

⁵ See Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43.

⁶ Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:7.

⁷ 2 Peter 3:9.

the inaugurated kingdom is the season of harvest. Recall the words of King Jesus, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."⁸ This is the season we are currently in and our political action, when we get to that part of the conversation, must take this into account. We are those who have the task of joining in the bringing in of the harvest while the harvest is still ripe.

By contrast, the fully consummated kingdom, which is soon to take place, is marked in part in its early moments by the full and glorious return of King Jesus, the firm and perfect establishment of his kingdom, and the final gathering of God's people. The time of scattering and proclaiming and patience gives way to the eternal worship and fellowship of God's people in God's city where Jesus reigns forevermore as king. This fully consummated kingdom is prophesied throughout Scripture in both testaments. First, recall these words from the Old Testament:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.⁹

God's fully consummated kingdom is prophesied in the New Testament as well:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords.¹⁰

The soon-to-arrive eschaton must shape God's people today in their worship and witness. Before talking more about the identity and call of God's people, though, two final claims of King Jesus need to be included in this mental calibration of the believer's chief politic.

Jesus claims all authority. Unlike all earthly authorities before or after him that rise and fall, King Jesus claims absolute rule, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Recall that during his earthly ministry, Jesus

1) proclaims the kingdom of God by preaching repentance and forgiveness,

⁸ Matthew 9:37–38.

⁹ Daniel 7:13–14.

¹⁰ Revelation 19:11–16.

2) demonstrates the kingdom of God by signs and wonders,

3) atones for sin by submitting to death, and

4) further proves his divine status through his Resurrection, which he verbally foretells throughout his ministry. Abraham Kuyper cuts to the image of Jesus' total authoritative claim with gripping clarity: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"¹¹ Jesus' claim of absolute authority is not over-reaching since "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together,"¹² and "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."¹³

Jesus claims all allegiance. The Great Commission begins, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus continues with these words, "therefore, go." Jesus uses his total authority to commission his people, giving God's people their first and most important call to allegiance. God's people are not those people in the world who pick and choose what they shall most be about. Rather, God's people are a people who have been given clear, authoritative direction, to go and make disciples. Nations, groups, even people may ask for the believer's allegiance. States may require their young students to recite a pledge of allegiance. Indeed, life may require of an individual several or even many allegiances, but the believer's allegiance to King Jesus must take the primary position, and ought not have a near second. Remember the directness with which Christ issues his call to first allegiance:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."¹⁴

It is foundational that 1) Jesus is King and 2) the believer's total allegiance is claimed by King Jesus. Together, these two realities serve as the starting point as the church seeks to engage faithfully in the kingdoms, small "k," of the world. But what more ought to be said about the people of God?

Jesus calls a people and gives them a clear identity. The church is a gathered people. Jesus himself institutes such thinking in Matthew 16:18 when he promises that the *church*¹⁵ will be a defining term for the bride of Christ whom the triune God is building until Christ returns.

¹¹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvin*.

¹² Colossians 1:16–17.

¹³ Philippians 2:10–11.

¹⁴ Luke 14:25–27.

¹⁵ From ἐκκλησία, "the called out ones" and "the gathered assembly." Editor's note: see ECO's theological resource on *The Church* for much more on defining this word.

Building the church, however, is not just about gathering the bride, but includes the sending of the bride. God's people are not only gathered, but also sent. As sent ones, the church is scattered, "scattered like seed 'to all the kingdoms of the earth,'" as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, citing Deuteronomy 28:25.¹⁶ This great scattering is ordered by God's will that every unique tribe and ethnicity across the earth will hear the proclamation of the gospel.¹⁷ To this end, God's reconciling work through Christ on the cross reaching all peoples is paramount to why God's people exist, to spread the gospel and therein further magnify the glory of God.

The people of God are gathered and scattered, sent as heralds of salvation by faithfully witnessing to God's grace in Christ. Jesus, whose words ought to bear such great weight on the believer, says, "you are the salt of the earth," and "you are the light of the world,"¹⁸ and "Father, I pray that you do not take them out of the world, but keep them from the evil one."¹⁹ Therefore, the church is gathered, scattered, sent on mission, and commanded to be *present in the world*, visibly heralding the kingdom of God. This is the primary call of the church: to faithfully witness to God's grace in Christ Jesus. Like the angels appearing in the night sky over Bethlehem, God's people announce the in-breaking kingdom of God, a kingdom that is without end, without rival, and without blemish—a kingdom that is this day inaugurated—a kingdom that is very soon to be fully consummated. Until this consummation, God's people are to be found among every people group of the earth, bearing faithful witness in real time and in real place to real neighbors—that the Lamb of God has come, has offered salvation, and is in the most real sense of the term, King of kings and the Lord of lords.

The ambassadorial role of God's people. As God's people live as lights in dark lands, they are given the image of ambassador to clarify their call: "we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."²⁰ Consider several key markers of ambassadors:

- Ambassadors live within a foreign land.
- Ambassadors retain the cultural DNA of their home country.
- Ambassadors are expected to be different, to reveal an alternative.
In this sense, Christians are unique among all the nations, since no other land has the qualities that mark the land where the Righteous One rules.
- The Christian ambassador reveals the kingdom of God.
Like John the Baptist preparing the way, every Christian is given the task of declaring, through word and deed, that the Messiah has come.

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Community" in *Life Together: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works—Reader's Edition* (Fortress: 2015), 1.

¹⁷ How might the Great Commission be better understood through a word study of ἔθνος, most commonly translated "nations," in Matthew 28:19, which contains the range of meaning to include "tribe" from the root ethnicity?

¹⁸ Matthew 5:13–14.

¹⁹ John 17:15.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

However, this declaring characteristic of the believer is not without boundaries. No, the declaring act must have a true love of God and neighbor at its core if it is to be declaration that aligns with Scripture.

The imperative of love. The followers of King Jesus are issued an imperative: to love God and love neighbor:

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."²¹

Love of God and neighbor compels the church toward a focused way of beginning to move. "Start here," this ethic demands. Believers may arrive at various conclusions (there is a limit here, but what is meant to be emphasized for now is not the limit, but the freedom), but their starting place is the same: relationship with Christ and the bride of Christ, concern that mirrors Christ for the salvation of the lost, and an unwavering commitment to love God and love neighbor.

²¹ Matthew 22:37–40.

Chapter 2

A Theology of Rendering:

Exploring the State with the Imperatives of Mark 12, Romans 13, and Luke 13

Rev. Michael Thronton

How many in our churches have been wounded by a political conversation gone haywire? Generations are feeling more and more isolated from one another. Exploring the question of how we ought to relate as Christians to the State can help heal relational fracture and bridge generations. By moving our congregations back to first and foremost focusing on our identity as God's people, we can build resilience to cultural catch phrases and platforms and parties that too often distract us from our primary call to witness to God's kingdom and grace. Consider this question meant to trap Jesus in Mark 12, picking up toward the end of verse 14: *Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?*"

Here seems to be a basic yes/no question, a simple question, right? Of course, seeming simplicity is often a prerequisite of a trick question! If Jesus answers "yes," he risks enraging the Jews on *theological grounds*. Is Caesar the ultimate authority or is God? If Jesus answers "no," he risks enraging Rome on *political grounds*. After all, Rome is the ruling government and hasn't God established government for the good of the people? The Pharisees and Herodians have played their cards well: theology and politics are laid face-up on the table to put Jesus out of the game. Can Christianity answer both the question of politics and the question of theology? Jesus answers:

"Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."

They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.¹

Again and again we see Jesus living fully awake and aware to the issues of the day. May we, like Jesus, live awake and aware to the issues of our day, that we may be "prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."²

Upon his request, Jesus is handed a denarius, which he proceeds to examine. Jesus sees the image of Caesar and an inscription that reads, "*Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus: Pontifex Maximus.*" Blasphemy! Surely Jesus will not side with a pagan state, a state that is unjustly conquering its neighbors, exchanging civility for even more power. Rome gives divine status to a mere mortal, promotes polytheism, and ascribes Caesar the status of Pontifex Maximus, "greatest priest." "Whose image is this?" Jesus asks. "And whose

¹ Mark 12:14–17.

² 1 Peter 3:15.

inscription?" And then Jesus gives us the line that has echoed down the halls of history both within and without Christianity, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."³

Believers are not called to withhold from the state that which the state has the right to collect. We ought not get sucked into greed, holding onto early treasures, presuming we achieved them exclusively on our own merit. We must stop the pretense that human government ought not be a form and freedom of grace *under the context of human sin*. We are called to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. We ought to pay our taxes and do so when they are due! They belong to Caesar.

Does this mean we ought to maintain a pro-government posture at all times? Is Romans 13 not our guiding principle in our relation to Church and State? "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."⁴

In Mark 12, Jesus recognizes the relative autonomy of Rome, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Here, at minimum, what can be said is that Jesus utterly rejects the notion that his *present* mission in the gospels is to turn states into one kingdom theocracy. One day, yes, the one who is called Faithful and True will arrive with all power to strike the nations and to rule with an eternal rod of iron,⁵ but it is not this day. This day, which is our present day too: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

If Jesus stops here, and this is a most severe "however," Jesus will be found out to be no more than a puppet of the empire. Perhaps in this hair of a moment as Jesus is drawing breath to finish his response the Jews, the Pharisees and Herodians, think they've won. "A puppet maybe, but no longer our problem. We've uncovered him for his true self, a puppet of the empire of Rome. 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,' puppet talk. The Jews will side with us now, he's out of here. We've gotten rid of Jesus," they think.

But Jesus wasn't finished; Jesus continues, "and to God what is God's." If there was a Roman officer leaning against a nearby temple wall listening in on the conversation, this is the moment when he drops his cup of coffee, his mug shatters, as the smile on his face disappears and his hand reactively touches his sword's handle. "And to God what is God's."

There is a higher authority than Rome. There is an allegiance due above all others and it is not to the state or to the self, it is to the personal creator God, revealed throughout the Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ, *Lord Jesus Christ*, the *Great High Priest* for all the world, the true *Pontifex Maximus*. *Here, Jesus speaks truth to power*. There is only one true king whose rule and reign is from everlasting to everlasting who overcomes all the kingdoms of the world not with columns of tanks, but with the very breath of his mouth.⁶

³ Matthew 22:21.

⁴ Romans 13:1.

⁵ Revelation 19:15 quoting Psalm 2.

⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

Behold Jesus, who in the inhale says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," and in the exhale publicly calls his governor, Herod, a fox for the ways Herod demonstrated the anti-Christ characteristics of being conniving and deceitful. "Go tell that fox, I will keep on driving out demons and healing people."⁷ "Prayer for leaders and criticism of their practices are not mutually exclusive ideas," writes Esau McCaulley in his evangelical work on Biblical interpretation.⁸

If Romans 13 stands as a foundational text to lead us and our congregations to "submit to governing authorities," then Luke 13 stands as an additional imperative to be a confessing church that witnesses to the Kingdom that is above all other kingdoms. We must learn to create circles of dialogue that promote both the respectful pursuit of coming up under our earthly government, while too learning to speak truth even, and perhaps especially, when the truth is found to be directed against people and systems in positions of authority over us. Jesus models both, Romans 13 and Luke 13, in Mark 12. The church is to render to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, but not without also rendering to God that which is God's.

Jesus, standing in the temple in Mark 12, knowing he is about to relocate the temple to the hearts of his bride, the church, declares that you belong to God, declares that just like Caesar's image appears on a coin, so the very face of God appears in you. Therefore, *render to God what is God's*. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies."⁹ And, "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."¹⁰

The cards of politics and theology were played against Jesus, but he overcame. We, too, can engage in conversations that feel unresolvable by standing in the truth and grace of who we are as God's people. Christ says, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In Christ, the most troubling of questions are reconciled and you are filled with utmost dignity and worth as we walk as a child of God before a watching world.

Jesus listens to the Pharisees and Herodians. But he's not trapped. And we don't need to be trapped by the politics of today. Jesus affirms that those governmental authorities are utterly subordinate to God and his Kingdom, that is above all earthly authorities and without end. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."¹¹ In all matters, the church bears witness to the kingdom of God.

⁷ Luke 13:32.

⁸ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black* (IVP Academic: 2020), 53.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:9.

¹¹ Revelation 11:15.

Chapter 3

Challenging Claims of Authority: Psalm 2 and Isaiah 40 as Foundational to the New Testament Political Vision

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Among the many biblical passages that are relevant for considering political theology, it is worth highlighting two of the harshest condemnations of human claims to authority to contrast with what is generally held up as the positive statement of Romans 13. If we are to develop a systematic statement about the relationship of God to human authority claims, we must consider these very clear texts. By reading the New Testament in light of these texts, we see that the New Testament starts with an assumption that the kingdoms of the world are not established by God, but exist in rebellion against him and are “less than nothing.”

Psalm 2

The Psalms were intentionally organized, in a similar fashion to how we organize hymnals. As we might expect, Psalm 1 introduces the whole collection with a piece of wisdom that could be seen as a summary of all of the Psalms—that the wise person meditates on the law and wisdom of God day and night in order to flourish and join the company of saints who can stand up to God’s judgment, unlike the wicked whom are blown away like chaff or consumed in fire.

Psalm 2 immediately describes what is, perhaps, the most exact opposite of meditating on the law of God day and night—claiming glory and authority for oneself and rebelling against God’s authority. After all, if as Jesus says, we are to judge a tree by its fruit,¹ those who lead the way of rebellion are themselves the most corrupt of trees.

Psalm 2 is a call to the kingdoms of the world to submit to the king God has placed on his throne forever, the “Son,” and to stop their rebellion. From the perspective of the Psalmist, these claims of rebellious authority are absurd, so absurd that God simply has a laugh about them. God holds human kings in derision.

The original context of Psalm 2 is most likely about the coronation or enthronement of David or a davidic king. The speaker claims in verse 7 that God has “begotten” him this day. On this day, the king has become adopted as a son of God, and God has handed to this king all the nations of the world, for the purpose of dashing them to pieces with an iron rod. In other words, God will express his judgment on the rebellion of kings through his Son (verse 8). And so, the kings of the world should be on alert. They should serve God with fear instead of

¹ See Matthew 12:33; Luke 6:43–44.

their idols, and they should “Kiss the Son” or show a sign of submission to him, i.e. *worship*. The kiss could here be understood as kneeling and kissing the ring of a ruler. This is what worship means at its most basic.²

Now, of course Christians have long interpreted Psalm 2 as ultimately in reference to Jesus, not to David himself, since these claims are not true of the historical kingship of David. The book of Revelation makes great use of this Psalm in reference to Jesus and his return in judgment.³ And we can see echoes of this Psalm in Jesus’ baptism, transfiguration, and the Great Commission, as God declares Jesus “this is my Son” and Jesus declares “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”⁴

Is Psalm 2 about particularly rebellious civil leaders, or does it refer to all civil leaders? The answer it gives is clear—all those who do not “Kiss the Son” or bow down and worship him, are in rebellion against him, for “No one can serve two masters.”⁵ And we see, particularly in the book of Matthew, an ongoing theme of many different and surprising peoples bowing down and offering Jesus submission or “worship.” From the outset we see the Magi come and offer Jesus homage and tributary gifts.⁶ Their gifts are not out of kindness, but an echo of the Queen of Sheba bringing tribute to Solomon, and a foreshadowing of the vision in Revelation of all the kings and peoples of the earth bringing their tributary gifts to the reigning king.⁷ Satan demands Jesus worship him in the same way in exchange for the dominion that would rightly become Jesus’ own through his suffering, death, and resurrection.⁸ At the stilling of the storm, Jesus’ disciples give him this same worshipful reverence.⁹ And in his resurrection some of his followers worship him.¹⁰ In other words, Matthew seems to be clearly portraying Jesus as the Davidic king to whom all honor is due. Ironical it is, then, that the one who does “Kiss the Son” is the one who embodies the spirit of rebellion—Judas.¹¹ And it is this kiss of Judas that should remind us that there are many who offer lip service of worship to the Son, but who “rage and plot in vain.”¹² So Jesus quotes Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but

² Worship in Hebrew means to bow down or prostrate oneself, a symbol of submission. Worship is not so much a religious act as a political one.

³ See Revelation 2:26–7, 12:5, 19:15.

⁴ See Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35 and Matthew 28:18.

⁵ Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

⁶ See Matthew 2.

⁷ Revelation 21:24.

⁸ Matthew 4.

⁹ Matthew 14:33.

¹⁰ Matthew 28:9, 17.

¹¹ Matthew 26:48.

¹² Psalm 2:1.

their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”¹³

At no point does Psalm 2 acknowledge a providential establishment of human authorities, or even call them to righteous rule, but to worshipful submission out of fear of serious punishment. And this sentiment of the divine king surrounded by raging and rebellious enemies is one echoed by the Gospels and Johannine literature, which at points makes the dichotomy between God and his people and those of the world total. Satan’s temptation to hand over dominion to Jesus in exchange for worship of Satan is only a true temptation if Satan has this authority.¹⁴ Satan rules the world and all of its kingdoms, 1 John says with total clarity.¹⁵ The Lord’s Prayer in both Matthew and Luke expresses an assumption Jesus holds that God’s will is not done on earth as it is in heaven. The gospels thus challenge a smug belief in providence empowering human civil authorities. Rather, it seems from their perspective that all the world is arrayed against God as the forces of darkness try to conquer the light. The language of John 1 shows a view that Jesus is invading a rebellious and dark world as the light, and that the darkness has tried and continues to try and overcome the light, though it will not succeed. This is John’s introductory summary of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection—the light conquering the ubiquitous darkness.

Isaiah 40

Another scathing text in the Old Testament with New Testament echoes is Isaiah 40, perhaps the most negative text on civil authority in Scripture. This chapter is replete with famous verses usually used without any context, often thanks to Handel’s *Messiah*. Chapter 40 opens with the call from God, “Comfort, comfort my people.” The comfort is a proclamation of peace, that God has conquered, reigns, and forgives the sins of his people. This comfort comes with a reassurance, the claims of the strength of human enemies and nations is vain. Even if the nations have their beauty (v. 6), it is God who sends the withering wind on their beauty. “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of God will stand forever” (v. 8) is not a statement about the beauty of individual human life in general, but about the fading glory of human powers.

Verses 10–11 describe how God will come himself to rule his people with judgment and justice. Using language familiar from Psalm 23, God is described as a shepherd, a well-known Ancient Near Eastern image of kingship. God will lead his people with care, compassion, provision, and protection.

¹³ Matthew 15:8–9; Isaiah 29:13.

¹⁴ An argument made often by Jacques Ellul. See for example, *If You are the Son of God: The Sufferings and Temptations of Jesus* (Cascade, 2014).

¹⁵ 1 John 5:19.

Verses 12–14 ask rhetorical questions comparing God with the claims of human rulers. God, who created all things, is supposed to listen to human claims of justice?

In response verses 15–17 show that the nations are absolutely nothing in comparison with God. They couldn't even tip an empty scale. Were all the mighty cedar forests of Lebanon burned as fuel for the offering of all of their animals, such would be a miniscule offering to God. In modern terms, the height of human accomplishments are of little notice to God. The billionaires who fly private rockets into space are of no account. So, the nations are the "less than nothingness" that Genesis 1 described as existing before God created. Isaiah is reaching for words to denigrate human claims of authority to the most insignificant level.

And yet, as verses 18–20 show, it is by idolatry that the nations claim divine power. The nations try to show they compete with God by making golden or wooden images of gods, but these are chained gods and rotting gods. As then, so now, human nations try to show their strength with idolatry of craftsmanship and claims of excellence. But the nations are chained and rotting gods, Isaiah is saying. And so we see today, as well, that nations make claims on our worship and faithfulness through idolatry.

And yet, it is God who has established the very world in which these human princes can make these claims. It is on the back of God's creation, in total dependence upon him, that they even live. It is this God who "brings the princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness."

And so, Isaiah 40 concludes with a call to allegiance to the one who gives true strength, not the nations, but to the everlasting God, the Creator of all things, who does not grow faint or weary. By depending on God we will renew our strength and soar on wings like eagles.

Isaiah 40 shows us that Israel was tempted to be like the nations, to follow after their ways of life, to think that their gods and their kings were glorious and strong, that they had accomplished mighty deeds. Compared to the Creator, these are less than nothings, like grass that fades, like chained or rotting idols. They are weak, temporary, and of no account to God. The picture of God's sovereignty over creation could not be stated more clearly and strongly in Isaiah 40. But God's sovereignty is here set entirely against human authorities. It is his general creative providence that enables them to make all of their claims. God stretches the tent in which they live, but nowhere does Isaiah give space to think that God has empowered these princes or kings. Their power is stolen, not delegated by God.

Isaiah 40 and 1 Peter

It might seem strange that the second most positive-sounding text in the New Testament about the place of human authority would quote Isaiah 40, one of the most negative Old Testament passages on the subject. But, in reality, 1 Peter understands quite

clearly the logic of Isaiah 40, and after reading Isaiah 40, we can see why 1 Peter is also highly critical of human authority without losing the sovereignty of God.

1 Peter 1:24–25 quotes Isaiah 40 to describe what being “born again” means—that we are not children of the fading grass and flowery flesh, but children of the Word. And it is for that reason 1 Peter goes on to claim that, as a people founded on the imperishable Word, we are the living stones of the house of God, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. But this makes us “sojourners and exiles” who must abstain from the passions of the flesh, having honorable conduct amongst the people of the fading grass. And this is the logic in which 1 Peter delivers its famous statements about submission to human authorities. We are to be subject to human institutions *because we do not belong to them*. God may indeed send human authorities to punish wrong, but not as established by him in an institutional way, but as Nebuchadnezzar and other thoroughly evil conquerors act as disciplinarians of God to correct the path of his people. It is precisely because human authorities do not have authority from God that we act with the utmost honor. By doing good we silence the ignorance of foolish people. That is, because we are children of God, born of the Spirit, not living by the flesh, we live with the utmost honor and goodness amid foolish and ignorant people who are enslaved to the flesh.

Put another way, Peter agrees entirely with Isaiah 40—human authorities are fools, useful to God in correcting his people, but they do not represent God, nor his will, nor are they delegated God’s authority. They are instruments of God’s will, but they are not born again from the Word. They are the fruit of rebellion and leaders of rebellion. They are, in reality, “less than nothing.” But that is all the more reason why we give them whatever honor they demand and pay whatever taxes they ask while we live as strangers and exiles in their midst. We pay the nations the lip service they demand, but we worship or “fear” God alone.

Conclusion

It is by reading these negative Old Testament passages that we are able to recover the New Testament’s basic theological framework for human authorities. While they viewed rival nations as absurd, weak, temporary, they longed for the day when God himself would be king in a heightened Davidic kingship. A King born of the Spirit, whose origin is heaven, whose authority is of that of the Creator, and whose strength endures forever founded on the word of God.

By approaching the New Testament in this way, Jesus’s claims make a lot more sense. Jesus wasn’t claiming spiritual authority in contrast to earthly authority. He wasn’t claiming souls without also claiming bodies. Jesus claims that Psalm 2 and Isaiah 40 are about him. That

he is the only true source of strength and everyone else is making foundationless claims.¹⁶ The “born again” people are his sons and daughters who share the inheritance of a kingdom that does not wither like the grass.

It is within this context that we can reread passages like 1 Peter 2 and Romans 13, both written by men who died at the hands of persecuting emperors, who were not using delegated divine authority, but stolen and fleeting power. They did not uphold those who did good, but they were met with people who did no wrong in the face of unspeakable injustice. They were met with men who refused to curse the emperor, but who could worship God alone. The saints and martyrs are held up as the political models of Christian obedience, not the patriots, the zealots, nor the revolutionaries.

¹⁶ Luke 6:48–49.

Chapter 4

Mary's Magnificat: A Biblical Vision of Justice

Rev. Emily Hamilton

From the newspaper to social media feeds, from neighbors' lawn signs to campaign slogans, the word "justice" gets used *a lot*. Some people mean *fairness* when they say "justice": do people have what they deserve? Does the punishment fit the crime? Does the reward fit the work? Others use "justice" to mean *freedom*: freedom of choice, freedom from restriction, freedom to self-select. Still others think of "justice" as *equity*: does everyone have what they need in order to succeed? If some of us start life on third base, how do we pay attention to the needs of those who start on first?

In this milieu, exegeting cultural notions of justice in comparison with a biblical vision of justice can feel a bit like playing Where's Waldo—a visually noisy scene with plenty of look-alikes and distractions, plenty of characters that *seem* like Waldo but aren't Waldo. Cultural definitions of freedom, fairness, and equity can have a lot in common with a Christ-shaped vision of justice, but they almost always lack the coherence and spiritual resources necessary to sustain the vision of justice we glean from the full scope of Scripture.

Instead, the Christian Scriptures bear witness to a beautiful breadth and depth of justice that has immense implications for how the church relates to one another and the world. One of the most compelling passages articulating God's vision of justice is the song of Mary in Luke 1, often known as the *Magnificat*.¹ Mary is of course herself someone who *needs* justice: she is a poor, unmarried young woman whose homeland is occupied territory of the Roman empire, *and* she is pregnant outside of marriage. And while Mary knows that this pregnancy is because of God's miraculous work sending his Son into the world, it's more than likely that people would not have believed her story. She would have been viewed unfairly, with suspicion, and moral disdain. From a worldly perspective, everything about her is vulnerable, shameful, and even forgettable, except one person in her life sees things differently: her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is herself miraculously pregnant in old age, and she is one of the first people that Luke's gospel describes as *just*.² Elizabeth recognizes what God is up to in Mary's life, and when Elizabeth greets Mary with blessing and joy, rather than suspicion and disdain, Mary bursts into song, celebrating the justice of God.

It's helpful to think of the Magnificat like a pair of glasses—a poetic set of lenses focusing our vision on the unique shape and structure of God's justice throughout the whole biblical narrative. And the Magnificat focuses our vision for justice in four directions:

Lens 1 - Looking back: the Magnificat helps us look back to the Old Testament answering the question, what is God's justice like?

¹ Luke 1:46–55.

² Luke 1:6.

Lens 2 - Looking forward: the Magnificat also directs our attention forward to Jesus, answering the question, how does the gospel enable us to live justly?

Lens 3 - Looking outward: the Magnificat directs our attention toward the world, answering the question, what are the arenas of God's justice and where is it needed?

Lens 4 - Looking inward: the Magnificat also invites us to look inside ourselves with the question, what holds us back from practicing God's justice now?

Lens 1: Looking Back

If you were a first century Jewish reader of Luke's gospel, Mary's Magnificat would sound strangely similar to the kinds of things Israel's prophets and poets proclaim and sing.³ With intertextual intentionality, Luke wants his readers to see how this moment in Mary's life is a culmination of God's justice already unveiled throughout the whole Old Testament story. In that story, justice is 1) acting rightly and 2) setting things right that have gone wrong.

One word for justice in the Hebrew scripture is *mishpat*, an idea best expressed with the image of balanced scales. When a scale is unbalanced, it's unjust; it's justified when it's balanced again. The image of balanced scales is an image of right relationship—the humble being exalted to their proper place, the proud being humbled to their proper place. In the Old Testament *mishpat* isn't just something that human beings are called to do toward one another; *mishpat* is also a defining characteristic of the way God acts towards his creation.⁴ Justice, the making of proper balance, is defined by the way God acts toward his people, most especially in the ways he *identifies* with the lowly. Repeatedly, the Old Testament names God as the defender of the poor, the one who executes justice for the widow, orphan, slave and sojourner.⁵ The God of Israel intentionally and consistently chooses the people at the "bottom," aligning himself with their concerns and lifting them up as those through whom he will show his glory to the nations. The central story of Israel's identity, their deliverance from Egyptian slavery, is itself a story of God aligning himself with the powerless and oppressed when they could do nothing to save themselves. God makes right things that have gone wrong.

Of course, the gods of the other nations did not do things like that. They identified with the people at the top, the wealthy, and the powerful—so much so that the kings and rulers of other nations were treated as divine. Pharaoh forced slaves to make bricks without straw; Nebuchadnezzar coerced multitudes to worship him; Caesar extracted taxes from his provinces. Each stand in sharp contrast to the God of Israel, who commands his people to rest

³ See 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and note the striking connections between Hannah's and Mary's songs.

⁴ Bethany Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson, *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017), 20. Hoang and Johnson also note how the idea of biblical justice is filled out in connection with the Hebrew word *tsedaqah* (righteousness).

⁵ Psalm 68:5; 146:9.

for a whole day each week, delivers them from oppression, and shares his very image with the humanity he creates.

Therefore, since the God of Israel is one who identifies himself with the lowly, and because the people of Israel understood themselves collectively as among the lowly with whom God identifies, Israel is to practice justice with special attention to those at the bottom: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien. Israel practices justice when their treatment of these groups of people mirrors God's own treatment of them, which often looks like radical generosity. Israel is commanded to love the sojourner and welcome them.⁶ They are commanded to keep Jubilee laws where every 50 years slaves would be free and land returned to original owners.⁷ Israel's harvesters would leave extra grain in the fields so the poor could come behind and glean the leftovers.⁸ Wealth was understood to be a blessing of responsibility to care for the poor rather than a tool for private consumption or pleasure. And repeatedly when Israel fails in this kind of justice, when individual wealth and excess comes at the expense of individual poverty and lack, God considers it an affront to his very being. To the God of Israel, injustice *is* idolatry, so much so that he rejects Israel's worship when they refuse to practice justice.⁹ Throughout its history, Israel will find itself on both sides of injustice as both victim and perpetrator, unable to save itself from oppression on the outside and unable to rightly execute justice from the inside. The prophets of God's people then long for the day when God's justice will "roll like a river" because so much is wrong that needs to be set right.¹⁰

Lens 2: Looking forward

Israel's inability to both do justice and secure justice means that God, in his justice and righteousness, sends his son, Jesus, to set right everything that has gone wrong. Even though Israel's God had always identified with the lowly, this time, God did it in a way beyond all expectation. In the womb of Mary, God took on not just human flesh, but *poor* human flesh, born as an illegitimate son, taking his first nap in a feeding trough for animals. The movement of God alongside the lowly will continue through the entire life of Jesus, culminating his death, in which he will be condemned as a criminal, deprived of due process, humiliated, dehumanized, and executed by torture. From birth to death, Jesus does what the God of Israel has always been doing: identifying with the lowly to the uttermost.

The gospel teaches us that Jesus does this for our *justification*—to make us right where we could not right-make ourselves.¹¹ To the victims in need of justice the gospel says, "Your worth is not defined by the wrong that has been done against you; instead your worth is

⁶ Leviticus 19:33–34.

⁷ Leviticus 25.

⁸ Ruth 2.

⁹ Isaiah 58.

¹⁰ Amos 5:24.

¹¹ Romans 5:6–11.

defined by the Son of God who stands beside you and gave his life for you. Your current suffering is not the final word on your life; you have a hope and a future.” To the perpetrators of injustice, the gospel says, “Your misuse of power offers a false promise of security and no amount of wealth or riches can make you right before God. Apart from the righteousness of Jesus, you have no hope. In him, you are loved freely and he offers himself to you as your true wealth and source of strength.” For those in need of justice who are often trapped in a shame-complex, the gospel lifts them up. For perpetrators of injustice who are often trapped in a god-complex, the gospel humbles them.¹² The gospel is good news for both, radically rebalancing the scales. Mary sings of the topsy-turvy reversals of God’s justice, pointing us to the truth that, for all of us, the grace of God in Jesus is the fuel of justice in our own lives. We seek justice (rightness and right-making) in our lives and our world because God has *justified* (made right) us.

Lens 3: Looking Outward

If then we stand justified before God, and if God’s justification is the fuel of our pursuit of justice, it follows to ask, where is justice needed in our world today? Mary gets us started in the right direction when she sings that God both “scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” and that “he brings down the powerful from their thrones.”¹³ The scope of God’s justice includes hearts (individuals) and thrones (structures). God’s power and work to make things right consistently includes and constantly moves back and forth between the individual and the structural. God’s justice is meant to impact individuals, their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. It is also meant to impact systems, the way power is wielded and collectively organized, and the policies and structures that shape our lives. Doing justice in our world requires attending to both individuals and structures, hearts and thrones. Unfortunately, most of us tend to emphasize one of these over the other. For example, some of us emphasize the importance of voluntary, private giving and charity—justice from the heart. Others are more interested in programmatic wealth redistribution—justice from the throne. But, as we look outward through the lens of justice in the Magnificat, some form of *both* is required. That means Christians should advocate for criminal justice reform at a policy level, while also being part of supportive relationships for incarcerated individuals. Christians should support organizations working in affordable housing, while also offering to buy lunch for the neighbor dealing with homelessness. Christians should support school board decisions that help all children flourish, while also showing up to tutor a mentee in an after-school program. Mary sings of a vision of justice that implicates hearts and thrones, individuals and systems.

¹² Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 61.

¹³ Luke 1:51–52.

Lens 4: Looking Inward

Finally, Mary's song shows us that God's vision of justice is meant to become deeply personal to us. Mary sings of God's epic justice and deliverance, but she includes herself and her own story in the praise: "my soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior...the mighty one has done great things for me."¹⁴ God's justice works its way into the deepest part of Mary's life, leaving nothing untouched.

In the gospel of Luke, Mary's song kicks off a whole series of topsy-turvy reversals that often lead to the lowly and humble experiencing exaltation through the gracious, justifying work of Jesus.¹⁵ However, there is one story that shows the other side of the scales: the way Jesus justifies a perpetrator of injustice and sets him on a new path. Zaccheus, the tax collector is portrayed as an unjust player in an unjust system of Roman taxation.¹⁶ In great grace, Jesus invites himself to Zaccheus' home for a meal, sharing table fellowship and hospitality. In response to this experience of grace, this act of *justification* from Jesus, Zaccheus commits with joy to the work of justice and setting right that which has gone wrong in a very personal and material way—paying back four times what he wrongly collected. Jesus rejoices in this repentance saying, "Today, salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."¹⁷ The grace of justification humbles Zaccheus to his proper place and sets him on a personal path of working for justice within the arena of the individual and the systemic because he has been lovingly made right by the God who identifies with the lowly. Zaccheus' story embodies the justice of which Mary sings—a justice rooted in God's character with Israel, fueled by the gospel of Jesus Christ, encompassing the arena of individuals and systems, and implicating us all to repent, repair and restore out of the grace we have received.

¹⁴ Luke 1:46–49.

¹⁵ E.g. Luke 6:20–26.

¹⁶ Luke 19:1–10.

¹⁷ Luke 19:9–10.

Chapter 5

Diversity in the Kingdom of God

Rev. Emily Hamilton

When I think about the beauty of diversity in the kingdom of God, I remember the summer of 2006, when I spent time in South Africa learning from Christian brothers and sisters working in college ministry. Even though apartheid had ended 15 years prior, I noticed that ministry leaders intentionally prioritized fostering a multiethnic, multiracial community among the students. These efforts were not considered ancillary or merely “nice-to-have”; they were pursued as crucial for effective witness to the power of Jesus in a post-apartheid campus community.

That summer, the ministry hosted a discipleship conference, and we frequently worshiped through song and prayer in multiple languages. One of these multilingual worship services was particularly moving. We ceased singing in English, and our black South African brothers and sisters began to lead us in Zulu and Xhosa songs, two of South Africa’s indigenous languages; I noticed tears streaming down the white students’ faces as we sang. White participation in the common song embodied a foretaste of a longed-for reconciliation that was still being built. Then, we started singing songs in Afrikaans, the Germanic language developed in South Africa from Dutch colonists, and the mother tongue of over half of white South Africans today. As white students led us in Afrikaans song, black students began joyfully ululating—high-pitched expressions of emotion and praise that’s common in many indigenous African cultures. The Afrikaans overlaid with ululation conveyed a sense of culture *redeemed*, especially in light of the history of white oppression and exploitation of black South Africans. As we worshiped our King Jesus together, the actuality of his reign crystallized more fully for us all precisely through the diversity of our worship—diversity across culture, ethnicity and language—all signifying the ways in which power and privilege are redefined in the Kingdom of God.

The beauty of diverse, reconciled communion, however imperfect and dim on this side of Christ’s return, is actually a miracle that reflects the power of Christ’s lordship, and as such, it is a primary sign to the world of the reality of God’s kingdom breaking in on earth as it is in heaven. Diversity (and specifically reconciled communion across diversity) is constitutive of God’s kingdom. This is repeatedly reflected in the great liturgical visions of Revelation:

Revelation 7:9–10: “After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice: ‘Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.’”

Revelation 5:9: And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Revelation 21: 22–26: “I didn’t see a temple in the city, because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. The city doesn’t need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God’s glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it...”

While many read Revelation as primarily eschatology, for our purposes in understanding the importance of diversity as constitutive of the kingdom of God, it is also helpful to read Revelation as not merely *predictive* of future events but as *theologically descriptive* of the alternative reality of God’s rule and reign in the midst of the world that continues to rebel against its true king.¹ As such, the liturgical visions of Revelation can be read as poetic polemics, standing in sharp contrast to and overt critique of Roman imperial idolatry and injustice that was widespread and, it seems, taken for granted by the churches of Asia Minor to whom the visions are addressed.

In the life of the Roman Empire, most of the first two centuries AD were known as a period of the *Pax Romana*, a period of relative “peace” across Rome’s diverse provinces and urban centers. This purported multicultural peace of the empire was one in which a multitude of tribes, tongues, and nations streamed in to offer their glory to the emperor. But the *Pax Romana* was a precarious “peace”, ensured through violence, coercion, idolatry, exploitation, slavery, misogyny, and extractive hierarchy. The “glory and honor of the nations” may have been streaming into Rome, but the foundation of this multicultural glory was not true harmony, but merely the squashing of resistance masquerading as peace.

As a counter to this *Pax Romana*, Revelation offers liturgical visions of the *Pax Christi*—the peace of Christ. This peace is not secured through the blood of armies and slaves but through the blood of the Lamb. This peace does not flatten diversity but brings it to fulfillment. This peace uses power to serve and to save, rather than extract and dominate. So, if the diversity of the *Pax Christi* is different (and better!) than the diversity of the *Pax Romana*, what are its distinctives? What does a community formed by the *Pax Christi* look like? In the liturgical visions of Revelation, we glimpse of a few important characteristics.

First, we glimpse a vision of communion across cultural, ethnic, and power differences. This is more than *mere* diversity; rather, it is diversity united together in common cause. Diversity itself was common in the Roman empire. In fact, the *pax Romana* ideology celebrated such diversity. Additionally, Paul’s letters indicate diversity was common in the early urban church, regularly addressing *diverse* assemblies—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves

¹ “As we have already noted, most people interpret the book of Revelation as a kind of advance DVD of the end of the world. The focus of the book, they think, is eschatology, the last things. In a sense, of course, eschatology is indeed a focus of the last book of the Bible, but in a profound sense eschatology is not the ultimate focus of Revelation. Rather, as in the rest of Scripture, the eschatology we find in revelation is a means to an end. Its intention is to give hope to people in trying and/or tempting times so that they will remain faithful to their covenant commitment to God.” Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*...ebook, location 1875.

and free.² These distinctions reflect significant diversity of ethnicity, language, culture, socioeconomic status, and privilege that would have abounded not only in the early church but also in the empire's urban centers. In other words, diversity *alone* is not what made the church distinct; what made the church distinct is *unity* and *communion* across that diversity. The diverse multitudes of Revelation 7 sing with *one* loud voice proclaiming *one* Lord and his victory over all. Interpreted inside the wider context of the New Testament, we know these diverse multitudes not only sing a common song; they partake in a common meal, share a common purse, and make a common cause.³ The mutuality of Revelation's shared praise ought to astonish us and would have astonished Revelation's early readers.

It is quite possible to have diversity in our churches yet still lack truck communion (singing one song) and sharing across that diversity. Christian sociologist, Korie Edwards has noted how, even in churches that meet the criteria for being labeled "multiethnic," the preferences of culturally dominant groups (often the preferences of white congregants) are more frequently followed, while the struggles of culturally marginalized groups tend to go ignored. Her research advocates for a vision of diversity in which the needs and struggles of the less privileged and less culturally dominant groups are born by the whole.⁴ Revelation's liturgical visions of a diverse multitude standing before the Lamb singing one song indicates *this* kind of diversity is the goal.

Second, in Revelation we glimpse a vision where cultural differences are not erased; rather they are affirmed as particular manifestations of the power of God. Cultural diversity, then, is not merely a temporary, "this-worldly" reality that will one day be erased in heaven. Instead, we see that diversity persists into God's good future and, in the present, serves as a foretaste reflecting God's in-breaking kingdom. In this kingdom, the riches of every tribe, tongue, and nation are *redeemed*, freed to show off their beauty in sync with the victory of Christ's lordship. New Testament scholar Esau McCaulley writes, "God sees the creation of a community of different cultures united by faith in his Son as a manifestation of the expansive nature of his grace...[these differences are] particular manifestations of the power of the Spirit to bring forth the same holiness amongst different peoples and cultures for the glory of God."⁵

For these reasons, we ought to be suspect of any notions of colorblindness or assimilation efforts that have seeped their way into our language and practices. Understood as positively as possible, advocates of "colorblindness" usually mean that they do not wish to act with bigotry based on another person's race. This is laudable, but incredibly insufficient in light of Revelation's vision. As McCaulley says, "colorblindness is sub-biblical and falls short of the glory of God."⁶ Not only does diversity persist in God's kingdom, but often, our efforts to

² Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3:11.

³ Acts 2:42–47.

⁴ Korie Edwards, *The Elusive Dream*.

⁵ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 107

⁶ *Reading While Black*, 116.

flatten cultural distinctions functionally lead to overt and covert assimilation pressures being placed on marginalized groups. The goal of diversity in God's kingdom is to magnify the glory of God; to highlight God's power and ability to create unity and common bonds amidst diverse peoples of the world; to help us behold God's glory more fully through the cultural expressions of our brothers and sisters from other families of the earth. Revelation's visions call us to be attentive, ensuring that our culturally embedded forms of worship and witness do not deteriorate into cultural assimilation tools.

Third, Revelation's liturgical visions show us that worldly powers and hierarchies are reordered in the community that is centered around the Lamb who is slain.⁷ In the Roman empire, cultural differences were rarely matters of *mere* cultural preference; they also reflected differences related to power, privilege, and hierarchy. Certain cultures wielded more or less power than others. Greeks and 'barbarians,' Romans and Jews, men and women, slaves and free—these groups were not just diverse in terms of culture but also in terms of *power*. They reflect different places on the social ladder. Astonishingly, the church was a gathering where these diverse peoples experienced communion across these cultural hierarchies. Not only did this power-diverse community share a common song, meal, purse, and worship; but in those very actions, the power differences among them were redefined. The strong were called to serve the weak; the privileged were called to sacrifice; the enslaved were called to freedom in Christ.⁸ And why? Because, as Revelation portrays, this community was gathered to worship the Lamb who is slain, the Victorious One who does not crush his enemies and shed their blood with armies, but instead, sacrifices himself and sheds his blood for their reconciliation and restoration. In devotion to Christ, "who emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant," the early church learned that diversity across cultural power difference was meant to be reordered.⁹ Indeed, the very heartbeat of God's vision of a beautiful, multicultural community is the slain Lamb, Christ crucified, one who does not use power for maintaining status and privilege, exploiting the weak, or insulating himself from suffering. Instead, the power of God for the healing of the nations is manifest in the posture of a servant. The community gathered around *this* King means that a new, diverse communion is possible—one in which the humbled of the world are exalted and the exalted of the world are humbled. If we are to pursue diversity within our churches, we must be attentive, then, to how God is inviting us to redefine cultural hierarchies and social power in ways that reflect his self-giving love.

In conclusion, diversity is constitutive of God's kingdom, but this diversity is distinct: it's a diversity bound in unity and common cause, a diversity that persists and does not flatten difference, and a diversity that reorders power and hierarchy.

⁷ "Revelation is a counter-imperial challenging Rome's theology of Victory and Power with what many have called 'Lamb power.' We are victorious by following the Lamb, not Babylon, Rome, or analogous imperial powers." Gorman, *Revelation*, loc 1940

⁸ See the Pauline Household codes, Colossians 4 and Ephesians 5.

⁹ Philippians 2:7.

Chapter 6

John 3 and Galatians 3 on a New *Ethnē*

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

The New Testament continues the Old Testament's understanding of the people of God as a people, that is, as a tribe, nation.¹ Two texts in particular clarify our understanding of what Jesus and Paul thought they were talking about when they referred to a new birth.

John 3

John 3:16 is undoubtedly the most famous verse in the Bible, often touted as a nutshell summary of Christianity—God loved the world, he gave his Son, and whoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. And yet, scholars who have studied the concepts that lay behind Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus offer us quite a different perspective, one that is far less otherworldly. What concerns us here is mainly that what Jesus is challenging Nicodemus on is not his inner spiritual life, but his understanding of what it means to be a child of God by genealogical connection to Abraham. The "eternal" or *aionic* life that Jesus promises is not so much about an endless time as it is a characteristic of an era. In the ancient world, dates were fixed to the reign of monarchs. Dates were kingdom-oriented. Jesus offered Nicodemus a different kingdom rule that had a whole different character, and he described how one accesses this invading eon—by being born by water and the Spirit.

Jesus's famous conversation with Nicodemus has been subject to as much confusion as Nicodemus himself displayed. For generations of "born-again" Christians the language of being born again or born from above (translators debate the best translation), meant that a person had gone through a converting religious experience. It is highly unlikely that this was what Jesus was talking about and is rather the fruit of a clearly traceable history of pietism and revivalism that was highly influential to John Wesley, and through his Methodism movement, on the English speaking church.

In talking about a new birth, Jesus refers to the taking on of a new identity, one that is no longer defined by one's biological parentage, but by the Holy Spirit's adoption of people into the family of God. What this means is that Jesus is describing a kind of new genealogy, a new family tree. Jesus was offering inclusion in God's family in a way that would make his followers co-heirs of his kingdom. This is a people group united by the Holy Spirit in baptism, initiated into Jesus's family by the same means he began his ministry.

This being born again (or born from above) does not mean that someone has a new spiritual life in the midst of their regular earthly life. The conversation about spirit versus flesh is not saying that everyone lives in a divided sacred and secular way, but that the source of one's

¹ *Natio* is from Latin meaning "a birth." Just as "genealogy" has the Greek "*genao*" (to be born), so a *natio* refers to a birth-order, a people group. It does not, initially, refer to governing structures.

birth is what matters. To enter the kingdom of God, one has to be brought into it by the source—the Spirit, not by the flesh of Abraham. This is a contrast Jesus highlights again later in the book of John. The true children of Abraham are not those of his flesh, but of his faithfulness.² Those who are faithful like Abraham are children of God.

Thus, Jesus is not imagining that there would be a people who have tribal or national identities on the one hand, and a vibrant spiritual life on the other. Being born again or born from above means to be joined to a new people group that Jesus himself is founding, a new body-politic of the kingdom of God. Entrance is by the Holy Spirit, not by previous ethnic or genealogical identity. But this is no less a people group than the children of Abraham, or any other tribal or national identity. Jesus is claiming the promise of God to Abraham, to be a great ethnic group that would bless the whole world, is fulfilled in himself and in the ethnic identity he promises through the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 3

This understanding of entering the tribe of God's people through baptism is taken up in a very clear manner by Paul in Galatians 3. There Paul states explicitly that the true sons and daughters of Abraham are those who have his faithfulness. It is not by obedience to the letter of the law that makes someone a child of God, it is by the whole-life and identity faithfulness of Abraham. And this is what Jesus offered to the Gentiles. By faith, we are all children of God through baptism. By this baptism we "put on" Christ which means taking off the identities we formerly displayed—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Jesus is forming a new people group, a new tribe or *ethnē* that is integrated into the promise of God to Abraham. So, while this people group doesn't propagate by physical reproduction, but by "water and the Spirit," it is no less a people group, complete with the need for the formation of a life-together of such a community. "Putting on Christ" is not a jacket we wear over our native identities, but one that we put on over our nakedness.

Conclusion

Between John 3 and Galatians 3, along with copious other biblical material, we find that Jesus understands his own mission as that of creating a people group, like Abraham, complete with its own governing institution founded in himself alone, but that he commissions his followers to be his representatives to show the world what membership in this body-politic looks like. This is truly the invasion of God's *aion* into the present evil age. But entry requires a death and rebirth of political and ethnic realignment that anticipates the death and rebirth of resurrection.

² See John 8, particularly verse 39.

Chapter 7

The Salvation of Zacchaeus: A Political Theology Parable

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

The story of Zacchaeus, found in Luke 19, is perhaps one of the best known stories from Sunday School and childrens Bibles. The absurdity of a hated fat little man climbing a tree to see a passing rabbi is too much to resist for catchy kids' songs. But Zacchaeus is a story of salvation, one of the very few places Jesus uses that central Christian word. And it is a powerful story that reveals the politics of Jesus.

Zacchaeus was a despicable figure, not just a comic one. He was not just a corrupt petty local government official. Imagine in our time a Ukrainian man living in occupied territory. The Russians are raping, torturing, and murdering local Ukrainians and Zacchaeus takes the opportunity to save himself by offering his services to the Russians as a tax collector. Zacchaeus would use his local knowledge, his knowledge of local families and their wealth, to exploit them and aid their mortal enemies. We have every right to *hate* Zacchaeus. Justice demands punishment, perhaps even death for him. He's a traitor, and the worst kind, one who has no moral compass, but is simply out to get rich and save his skin.

The Romans were not significantly different than modern Russian invaders. Their soldiers had their way with local women,¹ beat their men, and asserted their claims with supposedly official actions like the very census by Caesar Augustus that was taking place during Jesus' birth. A census isn't a minor political action—it is the final act of conquest, solidifying the peace, and systematically extorting the conquered peoples.² Zacchaeus volunteered to help the very people who were oppressing his own, and make a tidy profit on the side.

Zacchaeus also needs to be read against the story of Moses murdering the Egyptian slavedriver.³ Moses turns to wrath and hatred, understandably. The Messiah should be expected to do something similar to Zacchaeus, put him down in his place, take his money, and give it back to the people.

Jesus will do something different. He calls on Zacchaeus' hospitality. In this way he seems to affirm Zacchaeus' ill-gotten gains. A "friend" in Jesus' time was not simply someone you liked to hang out with, but a political ally. For Jesus to eat with Zacchaeus would be like

¹ Some of Rome's greatest military defeats came about by the rage of a British woman, Boudica (d. 60/61 AD), who was tortured and whose daughters were raped by the Romans. She led a combined rebellion against Rome and slaughtered a great many Romans destroying whole Roman cities, including the first version of London.

² Consider another British example, that of William the Conqueror's census in the famous *Domesday Book* (1085 AD), which solidified Norman dominion over Britain.

³ See Exodus 2:11–15.

Jesus going to help a Ukrainian traitor as the weary faces of those without heat, water, or food look on in shock.

“Is Jesus a traitor too?”

“I thought he was supposed to be our Messiah, not a friend of Rome!”

We, of course, know the result of this story. Zacchaeus is convicted of his sin. He grows a spine. He pays back what he’s stolen, and more. Zacchaeus is saved, not from the wrath of God in this story, but from Roman allegiance. For, as Jesus says, “salvation has come to this house, for he is also a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” The lost in this story is one who has turned his back on God’s people. He is a friend of the world. Zacchaeus, the traitor, returns to his people even if it might cost him the rage of his new imperial friends. Salvation is restoration of the people of God.

The politics of Jesus here are fairly simple. The sons of Abraham must be loyal to God and to one another. Traitors should be sought out and restored. This is a story just like Hosea and Gomer—a story of how God has come to his wayward and treacherous people to call them back to himself. Zacchaeus, in Luke’s gospel, represents a whole category of people who have been lost to a worldly way of life. Jesus has come to save them from the world.

Salvation is, in part, the rescue of the people of God from bondage to the world and its temptations. The integrity of the people of God is a vital aspect of God’s command to love one another. The king of the kingdom of God came to seek and save the lost, as a physician comes to the sick.

This does not mean that Jesus rejects paying taxes to Rome. It means that Jesus considers it “lost” to join the Roman cause. It means that profiting on the exploitation of the people of God is to not act like a child of Abraham. And the story shows that Jesus desires reconciliation above enacting justice here and now.

The story of Zacchaeus is therefore instructive for our time. Although our national political situation is nowhere near as polarized and violent as that in Russian occupied Ukraine, it shows that Jesus sees “son of Abraham” as an identity far more important than “Roman.” Salvation encompasses political allegiance and not simply morality. The call of the story of Zacchaeus is to return to the people of God and restore this people as a people in the face of immense pressure to hate one’s enemies or join the powerful and influential enemies for the sake of profit. But it is also a warning. In the midst of forgiveness sin is revealed. Do we love the world and the things of this world more than we love the people of God? Are we faithful to God and his people or to the lust of the flesh, the eyes, and the pride of living?⁴

⁴ See 1 John 2:15–16.

Chapter 8

"Seek the Welfare"? The Church and the Politics of Jeremiah 29

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

These oft quoted verses have been used as primary texts for some recent political theology. Within it lies a command to pursue a common good within the place where we live. And, outside of the wider context of Jeremiah 29, this would seem the most favorable interpretation. It delivers a theory of Christian engagement with the world that encourages our participation in the institutional orders of our time and encourages a coalition strategy with those in power, to give the church a voice of influence within the halls of power.

But in its larger context Jeremiah 29 is a chapter about temporary political tactics, not a long-term ideal strategy. The command to pursue the welfare of Babylon is, in context, designed to counter the false prophets who were claiming that the exile would be very brief, like two years (28:11). Jeremiah says it will be 70 years (29:10). The commands to settle down, build houses, plant gardens, and seek the welfare of the city are commands to prepare the people for a long-term, multi-generational struggle, not a short-term hardship. A two year exile, with the promise of the downfall of the conquerors would lead to a continuation of the rebellious attitude that led the people of Judah to their exile. In order to learn discipline, their exile must be long. This is at the heart of Jeremiah's battles with the false-prophets of his day.

Therefore Jeremiah 29 is not the best chapter to use to pursue a long-term common good project with a local community. Read in its whole, along with chapter 30, it reveals that Babylon will be destroyed and the people returned to the promised land under a Davidic king. The common good between Israel and Babylon is not really "common" in the sense of sharing long-term values, but in a short-term sense of surviving through a period of subjugation to rise again in triumph. The language here thus echoes the experience of the Hebrew people in Egyptian slavery (30:8). And it also echoes the language of Psalm 2, that sees the Davidic king crush all other nations, "I will make a full end of all the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you [Israel] I will not make a full end" (30:11). The hope is not here an integration by which Babylon pursues godly living through the witness of godly people pursuing the common good together. Nor is the hope that the kingdom of God would arrive through Babylon, but that the people of God are rescued whole and intact out of Babylon, which is itself destroyed. The author of Revelation picks up on this theme, "...For in a single hour she [Babylon] has been

laid waste. Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her.”¹

The picture we get in Jeremiah 29 is one of hostility, not of integration or neighborliness for the common good. Jeremiah is advocating a survival tactic in a situation of oppression as slaves in a conquered nation.

Is this text about exile as God’s judgment applicable to our context? The church in America has not been a conquered people exiled, but part of a dominant group in an global superpower. Its pursuit of the common good has been a tactic of long-term integration and influence-seeking, rather than a survival tactic. Thus, it does not seem likely that theologians who advocate Jeremiah 29 as a political strategy would likewise want to rejoice at the destruction of America, which a close parallel of this text would demand.

So, Jeremiah 29 represents a fundamentally different situation to that of the church in America in our time. But that doesn’t mean it won’t soon be true of the church if the church experiences marginalization and becomes a people in exile. That would require, first and foremost, that the church is an identifiable people apart from our institutional forms. Could the church exist without buildings, institutions, and finances, but as an identifiable *people* who band together to practice internal marriages, self-sufficient microeconomies (plant gardens), and produce new generations of people faithful above all to God? This certainly happened with the Jewish people of the exile who have maintained an independent cultural identity for thousands of years.

In the larger scheme of biblical theology, we might say that Jeremiah 29 does indeed match the situation of the church at large, and for this reason the book of Revelation uses Babylon as the apex city of human achievement and human oppression. Jeremiah 29 does track well with the theology of the kingdom of God, and so the book of Hebrews echoes the language of “strangers and exiles.”² Scripture maintains an oppositional attitude between the people of God and the powerful empires of the world (represented through their capital cities in Revelation).

The political strategy of Jeremiah 29 thus would seem to match that of Jesus sending his disciples into the nations, dispersing them as sheep in the midst of wolves, needing to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. The political strategy of Jeremiah 29 is not the common good for its own sake, or for Christians joining this or that vision of the flourishing of a city or nation, but for shrewd tactics of survival in the midst of a hostile land—exactly what Jewish literature of the exile and Second Temple Period uphold in stories like Esther and Judith.³

¹ Revelation 18:19–20.

² Hebrews 11:13.

³ Judith is a book in the Apocrypha that tells of a Jewish woman that kills Holophernes, an enemy general, by seducing him and cutting off his head.

Another way of looking at Jeremiah 29, then, is as a radical call to retain the primary identity of the people of God in the midst of temptation to acculturate, and to refrain from open rebellion that would not only be mercilessly crushed, but also does not represent the Abrahamic mission of being a blessing. The danger in misreading Jeremiah 29 as a call to support common good visions of our cities, states, and nations, is that we submit to definitions of “us” and “the good” that do not have Jesus as king. And so, whatever our intentions, we end up with youth who efficiently adapt to a new environment in which Jesus’ kingship is given only lip-service and private devotion.

Where is the church in America, then? Is it in exile? Has it been conquered for disciplinary reasons? Has it lost its institutional forms and central identity markers in temple, priesthood, palace, and kingship? And if we have not yet lost all of these things, could we survive as Jeremiah hopes, promises, and commands his people to do through patient survival tactics? Or is the church still, perhaps like Joseph in Egypt, powerful, influential, and dependent on the goodwill of the rulers of our day? If it is, the warning of the Hebrew people in Egypt should remain... a new emperor will arise who does not remember Joseph, and the common good can cease to be common by the will of the rulers.

Whatever the case, Jeremiah 29 should be a call first and foremost to cultivate a strong community identity together as Christians whose devotion to one another supercedes our devotion to political parties or identities outside of Jesus. And if we pursue the common good of our cities, we must first do so as a coherent *people group*, not as an *institution* underneath the authority of the government.

Section II: Theological Foundations

Chapter 9

The Reformed Tradition—A Reforming Political Theology Reforming after Christendom

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Theology, like all human thinking, occurs within a tradition. Even the Bible itself contains the thinking of traditions. Paul uniquely engaged the Jewish tradition with the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, most notably in his speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17. And so we live within a theological and philosophical tradition that is important to respectfully and critically engage.

This chapter will briefly survey how the Reformed tradition has engaged with the political world, and how the politics of each era made an impact on the Reformed tradition itself. We will then examine how we might begin to think afresh with Reformed doctrines to encounter the real challenges of a new political situation in which Reformed churches, like all others, have lost their social and political places of influence.

History of the Tradition

The Reformed theological tradition has been a powerful force in European and North American political history. Reformed Christians have consistently been at the forefront of movements of social and political reform in European society.

One of the tradition's founding fathers, John Calvin, was himself a political-religious refugee in Geneva. He addressed his seminal work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* to the king of France, Francis I (r. 1515–1574). His letter to Francis asked that the king see the reforming movement outlined by his book as a critique of abuses, not an aim for sedition. And so we see that, from its inception, the Reformed movement aimed to appeal to the dominant political institution to consider making reforms. It is from this general position, one that Luther and his movement generally upheld as well, that the term "Protestant" comes about. For, they were indeed protesters and not intentional revolutionaries. Protestors demand reform, thus legitimizing those in power by asking them to use their power differently. Revolutionaries, by contrast, deny the legitimacy of their rulers and so refuse to protest, to ask, or to hold conversation with the powerful. This was the role of the Anabaptists who variously tried violent revolution and non-violent alternate community formation.

The Reformed tradition encountered significant political challenges in England and Scotland during the 17th century that would prove very formative for its later political history. The established Presbyterian Church of Scotland was organized by John Knox who had studied with John Calvin in Geneva as a political refugee. The Scot's Confession of 1560, of which Knox was a superintendent, declared that God had appointed all rulers and that rebellion

against them made them "not merely enemies to humanity but rebels against God's will." And it laid out that state powers had a specific duty to ensure the true religion, while also denying that civil leaders were heads of the church.

But in 1638 thousands of Scots signed up to the National Covenant which opposed King Charles I's attempt to make Scotland Episcopal—under the authority of bishops who answered to the king—rather than Presbyterian which elects representatives who meet in a parliamentary style. While the National Covenant upheld the authority of the king in theory, in practice it constituted the start of a rebellion that led to two brief wars called the First and Second Bishop's Wars (1639–1640), which the Scots won. Thus, because the Presbyterians in Scotland and England believed that the church's affairs were not under the authority of the king beyond the limited capacity of calling synods and suppressing heresy, they ended up defending their faith-political commitments even at the cost of revolutionary or civil war. The fruit of this conflict sowed the seeds of the First and Second English Civil Wars (1642–46).

Charles I was forced to call Parliament into session to raise funds for war. Parliament then refused to disband and openly declared war against Charles I. This "Long Parliament" (1640–1660) commissioned the *Westminster Standards* that formed the basis of Presbyterian theology thenceforth and superseded the *Scots Confession* in Scotland. The *Westminster Confession* was not a standalone document—it came with a polity that outlined the Church of England on a Presbyterian model similar to the Scots model.

This is a long and complicated history, but the simple outcome was that Presbyterians were deposed in England by Oliver Cromwell in 1648 who transformed England into a military dictatorship with an Independent church. The *Westminster Standards* lasted in England for just over one year. This break between Cromwell and the Presbyterians led the Scots to move against Cromwell and England by seeking to restore the monarchy in the person of Charles II. This restored king, unfortunately, did not respect his agreements with the Scots and the Covenanters were persecuted and massacred. Their faith only became legal again after the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 when William and Mary of Orange ascended to the thrones of England and Scotland at the invitation of Parliament.

These foundational religio-political movements left their mark on the character of the Reformed tradition and those who immigrated to North America. Trust in monarchs was precarious as the Covenanters learned. Trust in Parliament was precarious, as the English Presbyterians learned from Oliver Cromwell. Thus, when the Reformed tradition migrated to the British colonies in North America, they saw an opportunity to forge their own political path, and so were instrumental in both local governments, and in developing new political structures that broke down the connection between ecclesiology and politics.

Presbyterian John Witherspoon (1723–1794) was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence (1776). He helped draft and signed the Articles of Confederation (1777) that predated the Constitution (1789), and he supported the ratification of the latter. But, like many of the Founding Fathers of America, he was far more influenced by the popular philosophies of the day than by a biblical vision of political engagement.

Witherspoon, like many of his contemporaries, saw religion as a private source of moral virtue that was necessary to shape public governments formed by reason, not by religion. This was a uniquely American secular vision of Christian political engagement in which religion forms private virtue but is not necessarily a guide to rational government. This is still perhaps the dominant position of both liberal and conservative Christians in America. This is the so-called "separation of church and state" in which the private/public spheres are carefully delineated with religion being largely confined to the private sphere and only entering the public as it represents a political constituency, rather than as an established institution.

This doesn't mean Reformed American Christians have not used the Bible or theology in political reasoning and debate. Slavery and Abolitionism split the Presbyterian Church in America, with each side arguing biblical reasons for their views. The aforementioned Witherspoon was himself pro-slavery, as were Southern Presbyterians nearly a century later. But Northern Presbyterians argued strongly against slaveholding with one, George Bourne, being given credit as the first person to argue for immediate emancipation without compensation in 1818. Thus, there was a constant tension between a desire for a secular public square and a felt need to use Christianity to appeal to the hearts and minds of the body politic.

Throughout the American experience of Presbyterianism, the theological foundations of how church and state should interact shifted considerably. The *Westminster Confession* had been written at the behest of the Long Parliament in England as the official theological document of the established Church of England. The established Church of Scotland adopted and held on to *Westminster* when England abandoned it. But in 1788, the year before the ratification of the Constitution of the United States, American Presbyterians significantly modified the chapter on Civil Government to reflect the American experience. The original (1647) stated that the civil magistrate

hath authority, and it is his duty to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the Truth of God be kept pure and intire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and Discipline prevented or reformed: and all ordinances of God duely settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof he hath power to call Synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.

This language clearly demanded that the civil authority be understood as the "Defender of the Faith" a title still held by the British crown. This involved the power to call church assemblies and speak into them, and to exercise discipline over the church to keep it pure.

This language was modified in 1788 in America to read in part:

Yet, like good fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions without violence or danger. Also, since Jesus Christ has appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, prevent, or hinder the due exercise of church discipline among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates

to protect the lives and the good name of all their people, in such an effective manner that no person is allowed, on the pretense of either religion or of opposition to a religion, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person, and to make sure that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies are held without molestation or disturbance.

Note how this language fits the disestablished nature of the then soon-to-be-ratified Constitution and its later First Amendment. This later version of *Westminster* upheld denominational diversity rather than keeping the church united, pure, and whole. This transformation of a statement of faith reveals how neither the 1647 nor 1788 version was based on scriptural reasoning, but on enshrining then current political philosophies.

And yet, the logic of 1788 became the established modern position not only in American understandings of the place of religion, but it has influenced many nations that adopted modern secularity thereafter. This is seen in the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934) from Germany written to reject the position of the "German Christians" and the Nazi government. Like *Westminster* of 1788, Barmen sought to keep the state out of the church's business:

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.¹

Clearly, much had shifted in the Western Christian world from 1788 to 1934 and the role of the civil magistrate had threatened a kind of totalitarian replacement of religious institutions with a civil-state religion, a trend that has only continued into the 21st century. The belief of a John Witherspoon, that the church was necessary to the functioning of civil society by forming the moral virtue necessary for representational government to correctly function, has disappeared in the wider secular world, with the state appropriating to itself the role of moral formation, especially through public educational structures.

We might say that, although the Reformed tradition has long grounded itself on *Sola Scriptura*—having Scripture alone as its authority in matters of faith—it is clear from this brief history that this principle has not been entirely observed. This is evident by the adoption and promotion of political theories that are independent of Scripture within statements of faith ostensibly grounded in Scripture. We could point out that the vast majority of the Bible's teaching on the nature of political government is ignored in favor of the few passages that give wide support to the God-given authority of the state, namely Romans 13, 1 Peter 2:13–17. Other verses that question the single-minded affirmation of human governing authority, like Psalm 2, 1 Samuel 8, 1 John 5:19, Isaiah 40 and many others have not been included in the discourse.

¹ See *The Confessional Standards of ECO*, 149.

After Power—Redeeming Reformed Theology from Political Servitude

Whether or not one agrees with the Witherspoonian notion of Christianity as moral guide for proper citizenship in a secular state, the problem remains that the Reformed tradition has not, in the realm of political theology, been proactively forming its communities based on Scripture alone, but has adopted to the trends of political theology. It is not, of course, unique in this. Nearly all of our Christian traditions have sided with political theories not derived from Scripture, including those who have supported Monarchism, Fascism, and Socialism.

This is certainly understandable. We all live in a place and time where people in power have the power of the sword, and that threat of violence keeps us in our place, or forces us to reject the state entirely in open rebellion, civil disobedience, or attempting to drop out. And we live in a unique time of church history in which the church has been disempowered, disrespected, and demoted in society. This is a period after-power, and it means we are now at liberty to think in a more independent manner about Reformed theology and political theory. So, what is there in the Reformed theological tradition that is not bound to the power structures of its time that we could use to move ahead?

God's Sovereignty

Firstly, we have God's sovereignty. Sovereignty is obviously a political concept, having to do with kingship. "Sovereign" means having supreme power. But the sovereignty of God is often misunderstood today because power is usually understood as a zero-sum competitive market between roughly equivalent things called "will." So, historically philosophers and laypeople alike have debated how God can be sovereign if people have free will, and vice-versa. The solutions to this problem often leave us intellectually wanting. We can respect God and make humans machines, or give humans freedom and make God powerless to do much about anything. But like many dilemmas, this one is false.

The sovereignty of God should not be understood as a *property* of God. No one *has* sovereignty. Sovereignty is a *relationship* and must be *expressed* in action. *The power of God is a relationship, not a thing.* The same is true of human power and will. Our desires are not free in any radical sense of the term, but are conditioned by the world we live in and our personal capabilities. We are capable of the relatively limited things of which we are capable. God is capable of all things. But God does not choose to express his power over all creation in ways we might expect. Philippians 2 outlines how God in Jesus demonstrates his character by not overpowering his people with judgment. It is an outline of the character of God's sovereignty. The covenant of God with Noah after the flood confirms that God will not overpower human evil with destruction. So, if the power of God is a relationship, his power is expressed in relationships according to his character, which is love. And that means that God's sovereignty looks nothing like human sovereignty. "My ways are not your ways."² God does

² Isaiah 55:8–9.

not yet express his ultimate and immediate kingship over his creation, instead working through proximate causes and bearing patiently with sinners.³

Now, the will or desire of God is a somewhat complicated topic. For, we can talk about the permissive will of God in which he allows for human sin and for Satan to exercise his power. And we can talk about the governing (or "effective") will of God in which God causes all that happens. The question of political theology is whether human political systems are part of God's permissive will, or part of his governing will. Traditionally the answer has been the latter, that God has set up every human authority specifically. We, in our post-Christendom situation, are beginning reevaluate this confident belief by asking whether human government is better understood as part of God's permissive will that gives the freedom to human institutions to develop as fruit of human sin.⁴

Why does this distinction matter? If God is the author of human institutions then they are basically trustworthy in the long-term as expressions of co-rulership with God. Abuses of power are just that, abuses and thus exceptional. If God has not authored human institutions, then they are fundamentally untrustworthy expressions of human rebellion and claims to a legitimacy of rule over others is an abuse in itself.

In spite of how political theological positions have kept pace (almost exactly with the 1788 *Westminster Confession*) with the beliefs of the wider political society in which the Reformed church has existed, there are many other points of solid biblical ground upon which our tradition can reexamine its single-minded affirmation of the God-given rights of civil magistrates.

The Threefold Office—or Rethinking Fixed Institutional Roles Vs. Community Functions

The Reformed tradition has often highlighted the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, and although I think from a biblical theological point of view there are some minor issues with the neatness of this system,⁵ we can see that there are certain roles and functions Jesus plays, some of which are communicated to his people, and others that are specifically not. We are ambassadors of Christ. God is making his appeal to the world through us—be reconciled!⁶ But we are not kings and God has not delegated his ruling authority through us. That was given to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, but this function ceased when they stopped representing God as they chose their own way. Ambassadorship, salt and

³ See Romans 2:1–5 for God's patience in not exercising his governing will.

⁴ Although Calvin rejected the concept of divine permission, nearly all later Reformed theologians have accepted it. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Terms*, 222.

⁵ Namely that these are eternal offices rather than functions. The problem is there is no official office of "prophet" in the Bible and their functions and characteristics change significantly from the time of Samuel to the time of Paul. But in reference to functions of speaking truth to power, interceding for one's enemies, and justly ruling, Jesus certainly does these.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

light, have replaced co-rulership or vicegerency.⁷ The kingship, the power, and the authority belong to Christ alone, until his people are qualified to share in that power at his return.⁸

In addition to the threefold “office” of Christ, we can make a distinction between a political *institution* and a *community*. Institutions are political or social techniques used to establish an imaginative edifice where rules are codified, offices designated, and people are assigned to roles. Communities, by contrast, are organic, made of particular relationships between known people. Communities develop naturally, as it were, where institutions are intentional. So, community identities are often very fluid, hard to define, and governed by often intangible cultural similarities. Institutional identities come in the form of objective facts like social security numbers, ID cards, voter registration, etc.

For most of Christian history, the church has been understood as an institution that forms a community by governance. Denominational names like presbyterian, episcopal, independent, free, or non-denominational all point to the idea that a church is a governing institutional structure that forms communities by rules of order. One had to join the official institutional church to be a Christian for much of our history. But is this the intention of Jesus?

The kingdom of God is both an institution and a community. The political institution is, like all kingdoms, focused almost entirely on the monarch himself. But the community of a kingdom is the people, the body-politic of Jesus. Among most all monarchies there has been an idea that the king has two bodies—the people and his own physical body that are inextricably linked.⁹ This makes great sense of Paul’s teaching on the body of Christ and the sacraments.

We are the body-politic of Christ, inextricably linked to his ascended physical body. So, when it comes to the already-not/yet notion of the kingdom of God, we can say that his body-politic is real and present now. But the institution of the kingdom is not yet come. This means our role is to treat all human institutions as penultimate, or secondary, to the institution that will come and displace all others. That also means that our institutions must be treated as temporary and humanly constructed tools to aid the community of the body of Jesus in its mission and discipleship. Institutions that draw us away by dividing our loyalty, by causing us to hate our neighbor or enemy, are defective and should be replaced. At the very least, we do not owe our *fides* (faith/faithfulness) to such human institutions no matter how much they demand it of us. Just because we refuse to give *fides* to human authorities does not thereby make us rebels seeking to overthrow human authorities. Rather, it confirms that we act as ambassadors of an institution that is yet to come, but whose community is very real and very present. Ambassadors don’t take a fixed stance for or against the institutions and communities they are working within, nor do they lose themselves within their host nation. Instead, they

⁷ Vicegerency is different than vice-regency. Vicegerency is about delegated authority in the presence of the ruler, Vice-regency is a stand-in for an absent monarch.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:2–3.

⁹ Ernst Kantorowitz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957) is the definitive study on this topic.

represent the will of their own home political institution, and they might advise political leaders in a host state on certain matters (as Daniel and Joseph did).

In this way, the role of prophet is fulfilled by speaking the truth of God to those in power, the priestly act of praying and caring for the people of other nations is fulfilled, and the kingly role of representing the king's body in flesh through ambassadorship is accomplished. But, if we confuse the institution of the kingdom of God with human institutions and imagine the kingdom is coming without the appearing of its king, we displace Jesus as king, and subject his kingdom to foreign influence or conquest.

Thus, rather than seeing the church as occupying the threefold office of Christ, we might better say that the church community acts like its one officer, Jesus, in order to reveal what it looks like when and where Jesus is king. Thus, we don't have prophets, priests, or kings, we have Christ alone whom we imitate. This transforms office-holding institutions into communities of discipleship. It transforms political engagement away from static forms like Christ and Culture models, and toward contextual wisdom. This requires a higher degree of maturity and responsibility of everyone in the body politic, instead of depending on specialist office-holders to perform rote institutional functions.

Total Depravity and Institutionalized Sin

A further distinctive of Reformed theology is our strong view of human sin. Often called "total depravity" this doctrine is regularly misunderstood. It doesn't mean everyone is as bad as they could possibly be, or that all sins are the same.¹⁰ Total depravity means that "No part of human life is untouched by sin."¹¹ Sin is not limited to personal moral failings. Total depravity must include our institutions and even the motives for the foundation of institutions. One common confusion about the nature of institutions is that they have always existed. It certainly seemed that way for much of recorded human history prior to scientific studies of prehistorical and indigenous peoples. For example, we might think that money has been around forever... but it was a major social revolution starting in the 600's BC. The same is true of political institutions and the city (which go hand in hand, *polis* is Greek for "city"). There is no evidence of human urban and political living for 95% of the history of the species. So, human politics is a development, as is money, just as is the internet or the automobile. Institutions are a *social technology*. This means we have to ask some hard questions about them in relation to sin. For, we develop tools to help us solve problems, and if we misidentify problems, our tools may in fact lead us further into sin. No tool is "neutral." They all are designed to accomplish a certain task, and they conform their users to them in the process. Automobiles transformed the world and the people who use them. Not only is the world vastly

¹⁰ *The Westminster Larger* (Q. 150) and *Shorter Catechisms* (Q. 83) specifically state that not all sins are "equally heinous" and it is wise to keep this in mind. Even though all sin deserves the wrath of God, the Bible is clear that some sins are especially heinous. Jesus, for example, notes that those who corrupt children are especially condemned. See Matthew. 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2 and compare to Revelation 18:21.

¹¹ ECO Essential Tenets, III.A.

more connected, it is more densely populated, vastly more polluted, and people more sedentary and isolated from God's creation. Whether automobiles are "good" or "bad" depends on the question we are asking, but we can clearly see that no one made conscious society-wide decisions to become overweight, sit in traffic, breathe polluted air, etc. These were all unintentional consequences of simple desires for gratifying immediate felt needs of mobility.

So it is with human political institutions. They form us as we use them, but we ought to inquire as to the reasons for their existence. If the human species lived 95% of its history outside of settled urban and political centers,¹² what caused our ancestors in Mesopotamia 8,000 years ago to change their minds? This is a very current question in anthropology, with many noting the significant importance of slavery and wealth centralization possibilities in settled agriculture-fed cities. In other words, the motivations were generally nefarious and privileging of an elite at the expense of everyone else. Of course this runs counter to what we've all been told since the very first pieces of literature, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, through to modern social studies classes.¹³

But we do see the unintended consequences of settled urban agriculture in the story of Joseph in Egypt. Joseph helped Pharaoh centralize his agricultural economy, basically moving all grain stores to the imperial center and making the entire empire dependent on the throne for subsistence during the famine. This power centralization had unintended consequences for the people of God when a new Pharaoh arose who did not remember (and probably wouldn't have cared about) Joseph. Thus, the people of God end up enslaved in an political economy Joseph helped create. What Joseph intended for good, later Pharaohs used for evil. The centralization of power, argues one theorist, is a kind of ratcheting mechanism that is almost impossible to undo. Every action that moves power to the center is institutionalized and regularized, creating a society dependent upon centralized power.¹⁴ So, the traditional narrative—outside of a strong political world is savagery, barbarism, and anarchy—has come under harsh scrutiny in recent decades with a number of anthropologists offering evidentiary arguments that "barbarism" was chosen by many different peoples who only accepted civilization through force rather than through desire.¹⁵ Although we might balk at such ideas, counterintuitive as they seem, they again seem to find support in Scripture, which was written by people deemed to be "barbarians" by the civilized people of Greece and Rome.

Is it possible or even plausible that human political institutions are not eternally part of our nature, but are inventions designed to centralize wealth and power? Is it plausible that they are less concerned with the personal righteousness of their individual citizens (or slaves) than

¹² James C. Scott, *Against the Grain*, (Yale: 2018), 2.

¹³ See "The Myth of Civilization" in GP Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden* (Cascade: 2020).

¹⁴ Anders Corr, *The Concentration of Power: Institutionalization, Hierarchy & Hegemony*, (Optimum: 2021).

¹⁵ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain*, (Yale: 2018). David Graber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2021).

with their obedience to an orderly system of wealth production? And thus is it not plausible that the human governing institutions are, at least on balance, more likely to institutionalize sin than restrict the sinful desires of individual hearts? Might it not be that human governing institutions are tools of sin multiplication rather than sin management? The Reformed tradition's doctrine of total depravity would suggest that such a situation is rather more likely than not. This should provide us at least with an attitude of guarded suspicion against the motives of human governing institutions, which much of Scripture confirms. Apart from Romans 13, the vast weight of Scripture treats human governing institutions as enemies of God, doomed to destruction, and of almost no eternal value. Isaiah 40 is particularly harsh in calling these institutions "dust" and "less than nothing and emptiness" while linking them to idolatry and contrasting them with the Word of God that stands forever.

So, how do we reconcile Romans 13 with these other passages? How do we reconcile the Reformed tradition with scripture and modern evidentiary anthropology? Without discounting the sovereignty of God, we can see that these governing institutions are just as much expressions of human sin as are personal moral failings, and perhaps all the more dangerous for their coercive power. Consider, for example, Jesus's statement about causing little ones who love him to sin.¹⁶ If public educational institutions systemically promote sinful perspectives in the name of their own misguided sense of human justice, then we must have the institutional independence to be able to stand for a different godly perspective, one that has the confidence to state that the justice *du jour* is not justice. Total depravity should make us cautious about human claims to justice through social engineering programs. It is fully within our Reformed tradition to reject the claims of the state's vision of justice and stand apart from all political parties to independently declare the truth of God to the Pharaohs who don't remember the Christians who helped form institutions with good intentions. As we can learn from the 17th century English and Scottish Presbyterians—trusting systems of power and representatives of power is precarious. One minute we may be writing official governmental policy, the next being hunted down in a purge.

Grace Alone beyond Salvation

To total depravity and God's permissive sovereignty we may also add the doctrine of salvation by grace (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fides*). The Reformed tradition has been very strongly against the idea that we are able to save ourselves by good works (Pelagianism) or that we participate with God in salvation (semi-Pelagianism, synergism). And yet this notion of our inability to cooperate with the work of God has been restricted to a narrow range of human activity. It's as though we think can cooperatively work with God in building a civilization of sin-management or human flourishing built on kingdom *principles*, though we can't be righteous without divine aid. The problem with this is that salvation is not a narrow, spiritual work of God related only to the afterlife. Salvation, in the Bible, is part of the all-encompassing reconciliation of all things. And the predestining work of God is not to life after

¹⁶ See Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2.

death in paradise, but the adoption of people into his family or body with all that entails, including eternal life. Romans 8:29 explains that God chose his people to be conformed to the image of God that is Christ, and so be justified and glorified, and be the fulfillment of the creation's groaning as it awaits the revealing of the children of God and shares in their glory (8:20–21). God has predestined us for so much more than salvation from his wrath! The work of God is in delivering (saving) us from the domain of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of Jesus.¹⁷ Predestination is a political act of deliverance, liberation, Jubilee. Based on this biblical logic, we might see that God's sovereignty is expressed through his kingdom in contrast to the kingdoms of the world. That, although God is capable of working in and through anyone or anything, God is not thereby the author of the human projects of empire. If they manage to moderate some personal sinful desires, that does not mean they are participating in God's justice. If they centralize wealth and power to help their citizens flourish, that does not mean they are doing God's work. Thus, we might challenge ourselves to think about the history of human institutions not as expressions of God's sovereign will for moderating sin, but as tools of sin-multiplication by the enthroning of little kings who declare their own rights, their own goods, and their own notions of justice, and impose this on everyone else.

Our participation in the work of God, or lack thereof, is not limited to salvation, but is all encompassing. If we participate with the work of God it is only where God is king and authorizes our participation. And this we see evident in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" so Jesus says, "Go and make disciples." In other words, our participation in the sovereign work of God is in announcing his kingdom, loving his enemies, revealing to them what the kingdom of God looks like, and entreating them to "be reconciled!"¹⁸

A popular theological concept derived from Genesis 1:27–28 is called the "cultural mandate" by which some Reformed theologians see a co-creational aspect commanded of Adam, and thus of all humanity, in a work of civilizing the savage elements of creation. Problems with this view are many—most notably the fact that Adam and Eve's efforts after their sin are not participatory, but rebellious, and that their work in cultivation is intended to be disciplinary and reformatory. That is, Adam and Eve were supposed to be reformed by hard labor to reveal the extent of their newly independent power. God disciplines those he loves, and those who reject his discipline, like Cain, are illegitimate children.¹⁹ In other words, co-creationism is an over-realized eschatology that rightly identifies ruling with Christ as the goal of sanctification, but wrongly sees such a possibility present prior to Christ's return. In any case, Christ's rule has not been revealed and is not exercised, for as soon as God asserts his authority, it must come in a fearful judgment. Prior to that, we do not co-create or co-rule, we reveal signs of the eschaton through ambassadorship.

¹⁷ Colossians 1:13.

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

¹⁹ See Hebrews 12.

The Kingdom of God is God's Sovereignty

And so, we come to our final point about rethinking Reformed political theological foundations based on Scripture, and that is to ask the question, "What does the sovereignty of God have to do with the kingdom of God?" Historically these two categories have been kept surprisingly at arm's length. But they are one and the same. The kingdom of God is his sovereignty. And that means his sovereignty is not yet expressed in the way it will be at Jesus' return. This is a major challenge to traditional Reformed thinking that sees God's governance at work in all of creation. And yet, it seems that the weight of Scripture shows that God does not claim his kingship, that he has given creational freedom to humans to do human things, including rebel against him, that this does not impinge on his freedom in the least, and that human governing institutions are thus often attempts to create systems of sin-multiplication. The sovereignty of God is revealed in the eschaton, not through the pages of history as we read them now. God is not absent or silent. He is expressing his dominion through the *community* of his people, even as all creation groans for his *institutional* kingship to come and begin. But that will also be a day of judgment, and God is patient. The real question for us, then, is not where do we see God at work in the world, but are we being equipped and sent out as ambassadors of the sovereign reign of King Jesus in a world that thinks it can manage its own affairs, but is really a domain of darkness?

This united kingdom of God's sovereignty stands in contrast to Luther's "Two Kingdoms" and Calvin's "Twofold Kingdom" ideas in which both reformers divided the kingdom of God into separate spheres—the secular and the sacred. Calvin talks about this as a body-soul duality. God has established civil authorities for the secular realm and religious institutions (the church) for the spiritual realm. Although Luther and Calvin were seeking to dismantle the Roman Catholic hegemony by rejecting its claims of supreme authority over spiritual and civil life, their solution was neither biblical nor far-sighted. As we'll see in the next chapter, this theology laid the ground for secularism to simply do away with the church. The proper solution, I believe, was not dividing God's sovereignty into rather static spheres of institutional life. That solution has no historical basis. Religious and civil institutions are not universal in human history, they are human *inventions*, not divine creations.

But Calvin was on to something. Rather than dividing the secular and the sacred, body and soul, I think the division must be historical. The already/not-yet of the kingdom of God is not complicated if we understand that God's sovereignty is not a *thing*, but a *relationship*. So long as God does not express his institutional authority over his creation in judgment, the kingdom is not-yet. But so long as the kingdom has people within it, the kingdom is present. The king's body is represented by his people, his body-politic.

Conclusion

The Reformed tradition has typically been active in social reform, though often in line with contemporary political theories. From being part of the establishment in Scotland and briefly in England, to participating in power-holding in early America, to now being restricted from the political sphere, we now must question, after-power, what the church can and should be doing politically. Our Reformed theological heritage offers some help in this. We must learn to distrust human claims to authority and their demands for our loyalty, knowing that all areas of life are touched by sin. We must see that the sovereignty of God is not primarily seen through the background governance of all things that happen, but through the invading Kingdom of God. And we should see that our calling is not to support a gospel of institutional sin-management through state power and policy, but to be ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, speaking truth to power, interceding for our enemies, and creating communities that reveal what it looks like when and where God is king.²⁰

²⁰ See ECO's "New Theology Document" for further theological foundations on this theme.

Section III: Political Foundations

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Chapter 10 Politics

Politics as Social Management

The source of the word "politics" is Classical Greek. The *polis* was the Greek city-state. These city-states existed as mini-empires of their day, controlling large regions and many islands of the Greek archipelago. The wars between the city-states of Athens and Sparta are well-known, as are their very different cultures and governing methods.

It is out of Athens that the field of political studies emerges. *Politics* is the title of a book by Aristotle, the student of Plato, and teacher of Alexander the Great who conquered a massive swath of Mesopotamia and India before he died at 32 years old. Alexander transformed the ancient world by widely spreading Hellenistic language and culture, while also influencing the Greek world with eastern ideas of governance that deified its rulers. Aristotle's influence in the field of Western political thinking is hard to overstate, including in political theology through figures like St. Thomas Aquinas. One of Aristotle's main points is that humans are political animals. That is, Aristotle thought that it is part of human nature to engage in politics—for those who are fully human that is. He believed that barbarians and slaves were born to be conquered and ruled by the more advanced civilized political Greeks. The foundation of the study of politics thus has within it a belief in the superiority of the civilized world over the barbaric and a manifest destiny, to use a much later term, to civilize the savage.

Politics developed in these city-states as a transition from an older culture of tribal affiliations and is thus inseparable from the city or state. It is in the city that people of diverse backgrounds are packed into tight quarters, working together, living together, and having to work out their issues together in ways that could no longer be governed by reference to natural familial relationships or tradition extending back beyond memory. It is also only in the city where the dissolution of these natural relationships led to rational thinking about intentionally governing diverse people. So, politics has always been opposed to the authority of the family, tribe, or ethnic group by necessity. Before the city, people were not *social* nor *political*, they were familial.

Aristotle's claims that humans are political animals or rational animals by nature was then and is now demonstrably false. That is, Aristotle gave an aspirational definition of humanity that he desired people to pursue. In this way, Aristotle was very much a politician, using truth and fact claims to try and reshape people for a common purpose. Human history

and its vast prehistory has not been governed by the pursuit of rational perfection, but by seeking the goods of loved ones. The power of the *polis* demanded putting the good of the *polis* and its rational system above that of the family. This ultimately displaced the notion of love with the notion of *the good*.

Plato, Aristotle's teacher, had gone much further than Aristotle by conducting a thought experiment in his books *The Republic* and *Laws* in which he imagined a utopian or rightly-ordered civil society. Plato's ideal *polis* was divided into castes based on merit. Children were common property of the *polis*. Marriage was abandoned in favor of a livestock-based notion of selective breeding (eugenics). And thus the family unit was transformed into a civic unit ruled by reason rather than by passion. Modern political philosopher Karl Popper identified Plato as one of the most dangerous figures in political history because he started a process of "utopian social engineering." Plato identified "The Good" and demanded that society embody this good. Inevitably this led to great sacrifices of those who do not want to pursue this good. Popper's point was that Plato and his utopian way of thinking about politics (one might say pursuing a rational common good) paved the way for the brutal dictatorships and human rights abuses seen in the modern age of reason. The problem with Plato and Aristotle was that they thought about human society as *teleological*—oriented toward a goal. Every goal-oriented group makes sacrifices to achieve its goal, but the problem with doing this at the level of whole societies is that its goods are so distant, so hard to realize, that they inevitably shift generationally, leading to great sacrifices that eventually become vain. So long as the good can change, every sacrifice for it is just as much a movement in the wrong direction as in the right one.¹

To understand politics, we have to distinguish between the *state and the people*, the institution and the community. A people group, or *ethné* to use the Greek term, or *gens* and *natio* to use Latin terms, has a united identity, often that is grounded in tradition and the mists of time for ancient peoples. People groups love genealogies, have distinct languages or dialects, mores, and material culture. People groups operate more by tradition and taboo. If people groups are natural human expressions, states are artificial constructs designed to gather diverse people groups under a single banner. States are *social technologies*.

Thus, states exist as institutions of management. Their whole reason to exist is rooted in a belief that human groups ought to achieve something greater through intentional leadership and management organized into long-term managerial structures. Once again, *politics is social management*. Thus, politics raises the specter of judgment—what is the good, who has the right to determine the good, and who has the right to enforce a general movement toward the good at the cost of "anti-social" elements who don't acknowledge the good or the right of the rulers to determine and enact the good. These questions of judgment become questions of power. For I am aware of no historical war between rival groups that took place in academic forums of debate where the rule of reason was universally acknowledged and the losers accepted defeat and willingly conformed to the victors. Rather, as the famous Prussian military

¹ See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*.

theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) said, "War is... a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."² The goal of war is "to compel our enemy to do our will."³ In other words, the most extreme method of politics reveals the heart of politics—to get other people to do what we want them to do, to pursue the goods we think they ought to pursue, even if they don't want to. Politics as social management from its most gentle to its most violent uses power to compel people to consent to the will and the belief about the good by those in power.

What is Power?

But what is power? The answer to this question would differ widely depending on whether you were talking to someone from premodern or modern societies.

In premodern societies, in general, power was thought of as a transmissible *thing*, sometimes even personified as gods. Power was a force of success that made things work and made people successful. This force could sometimes be harnessed and used, but often had to be carefully guarded against for its ability to overwhelm. The means of harnessing power varied greatly, from religious ritual to magic, to political order. But power remained something largely independent, a bit like electricity, whose users had to be wary. Up around power grew many rituals, myths, and taboos to make power operate in predictable ways, while also safeguarding the people who used it. This understanding of power remains with us today, but usually only found in recreational forms, like video games in which players who use magic have a quantitative amount of magical power called "mana" which is taken from the Polynesian word *mana*, which refers to this kind of independent power. You also might recognize it in the "The Force" from Star Wars which was derived mostly from an ancient Chinese belief called the "Dao" or "Tao" in a still-existing religion called Taoism. Taoism bears the continuing marks of this older independent view of power by its various schools which each claim to harness the Tao in various ways—with magic, alchemy, meditation, diet ("inner alchemy"), or even martial arts. This is, of course, similar to Hindu inspired ideas of yoga, meditation, and chakras.

Where these theories of power differ was often in consideration of its source. While they all believed that power was an independent source, they might disagree on where it comes from. For some, it came from the elements of the earth—hence the practice of alchemy, diet, and other forms of materialistic magic. For others, power came from above, from the stars or the sky gods—hence the practices of astrology, burned offerings (smoke rises to the sky gods), and similar practices. Power could come from deep in the earth through "chthonic" deities. But whatever the source of power, it was often harnessed on behalf of the whole social group through political institutions who were specially in touch with the power-givers. Ancient

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.

³ *On War*, 75.

Near Eastern kings were sacred representatives of the gods, and many of their religious rituals, like New Year's celebrations, merged the power of heaven and earth in the person of the king.

Power could even come to rest within people, places, and objects (relics). Medieval Christianity is full of examples of this kind of thing. Celtic Christianity has its notion of "thin spaces" which are physical locations where the veil between heaven and earth is ostensibly thinner, and thus access to God, the source of power, is more readily available. We're familiar with relics—objects that have inherent stores of power due to their relationship with a crucial person or event of power. Medieval cathedrals were required to be built on the foundation of a relic. But crowns and scepters are also objects of power used still to this day in some monarchies. These are objects that empower a monarch by linking them with a source and lineage of power. Thus, we can see that the line between "magic" and politics is rather less well defined than we might otherwise imagine.

We see some examples of this understanding of power in the Bible, unsurprisingly, given the ancient cultures in which the Bible was written. Moses' staff,⁴ the bronze serpent,⁵ Elijah's robe,⁶ Elisha's bones,⁷ and Jesus' robe,⁸ are objects of power that communicate power in ways we moderns are a bit uncomfortable with. Elisha's bones, in particular, have the power of resurrection or at least revivification! So, it's hard to fault the medieval church for its craze for relics and veneration of the saints. The roots were there in Scripture.

So, the ancient view of power was that power was a thing itself that came from somewhere, that gave success to the one who had it, and that it was somewhat unpredictable. This was the same power that empowered politicians, like kings, through their own possession of objects of power in the throne, Excalibur, a scepter and crown.

The modern view of power began to arise among Christian theologians, seemingly starting with John Duns Scotus in his work *Ordinatio* (1290), but only becoming a popular idea into the Renaissance and Reformation. Power was no longer a thing in itself, but a kind of *relationship*. Where ancient kings received power from "on high," modern politicians get power through the consent of the governed. The French sociologist Roger Caillois summarizes this view well:

Whatever the kind of power—civil, military, or religious—it is only a consequence of consent. The discipline of an army is not a product of the power of the generals but of the obedience of the soldiers. At every level of the hierarchy, the problem is posed in the same terms. From field marshal to corporal, each is powerless if his subordinates, more numerous and better armed, refuse to obey their orders... For spying upon men, the tyrant has only their eyes and ears, and for oppressing them, only the loan of their

⁴ Exodus 4ff.

⁵ Numbers 21:9; 2 Kings 18:4.

⁶ 2 Kings 2.

⁷ 2 Kings 13:21.

⁸ Mark 5:30; Luke 8:46.

arms.⁹

This is a radical inversion of the old understanding of power, and one that has transformed politics away from sacred reverence of kings and toward winning the approval of the people to occupy temporary offices of power.

Modern power is a relationship in which there is always power-over those who consent to this overpower. This relationship became known as a "social contract" through the writings of political theorists like Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote a famous book by that title. Social contractarianism is a belief that people have some kind of natural freedoms and dangers that they give up to work together for the benefit of all. This mutual consent forms civil society, and governments exist to enact and manage this social contract. This theory is foundational to the Declaration of Independence of the United States—

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

In this way, and in contrast to older divine right monarchies, the United States enshrined this modern view of power as a relationship of consent.

This has transformed politics in dramatic ways. Now politics becomes a game of creating consent rather than finding ways to harness power. Marketing (propaganda) replaces magic. Where early medieval stories are of kings pursuing objects of power to gain a throne (Excalibur, the Holy Grail), modern stories of government focus on building coalitions oriented to beliefs about the common good, and strategies to get others on board.

Because modern power is about consent, it has given birth to forms of manipulative techniques, like propaganda and social engineering, in order to "manufacture consent." Indeed, we might even say one factor of postmodernity has been the loss of faith in the story of the social contract. Rather than independent people coming together to form civil society willingly, postmodernism has focused on how the social contract has been a myth dominant groups (like European men) have told themselves—after all, the Declaration of Independence didn't include women or people of color in the social contract process. Thus, putting the best spin on our contemporary political situation we see all sorts of groups coming together demanding a new social contract with equal representation. Postmodern theorists, as with some Enlightenment skeptics like David Hume, are a bit more skeptical of a naive view of social contractarianism, noting no one is a blank slate, and there can be no common good that is not coercive and unfair to various groups. The social contract is a myth that has never and can never take place (or it would have to be constantly revised). And so, they argue, politics is always a game of manufacturing consent through social engineering techniques.

⁹ Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred* (translated by Meyer Barash, University of Illinois Press: 2001), 90–91.

This leaves us with a postmodern picture of power as a kind of social competition for consent with a variety of tools for influencing people toward winning or manufacturing consent in ways that lead to sufficient coalitions to attain power. But this is a helpful place to understand how power interacts with Christianity beyond medieval understandings of God communicating his power through human kings.

Power is a relationship not a thing, but that means we need to ask, "what kind of relationship?" What would it take to give one's consent to being overpowered? A classically naive answer is that we all enter the social contract bargain and give up certain liberties in exchange for certain protections and common goods. A postmodern skeptical realism would answer—faith. Corporate brands, politicians, and public figures create images and myths surrounding themselves in order to put a human face on a relationship of consensual submission to power. We submit because we trust in a benevolent figure. The root of all power relationships is the well-rounded concept that the Greeks, and St. Paul, referred to as *pistis*. In the Bible this is usually translated as "faith." But *pistis* is much richer than the English word "faith". Power is given by the overpowered in the same way that a US Marine gives authority to his or her superiors. The Marine's motto is *semper fi*, short for *semper fidelis*, or "always faithful." The faithfulness of the Marine includes intellectual assent to the ideas of being a Marine in the United States. It includes the passion of the heart. It involves camaraderie with fellow Marines and being loyal to them both inside and outside of the theatre of combat. It involves willing submission to authority without asking questions of the structures of the system. And it involves an unwavering loyalty to the cause, even a love of it. Let's use the Latin term *fides* to indicate this kind of behavior or position.

The *fides* of the Marine is the goal of all political management. And it is the basis of Jesus-people, according to Paul. God's righteousness is revealed by his faithfulness throughout the history of the people of God to the people of God. And it is revealed by the faithfulness of his people who have lived with the holistic *fides* like that of the Marine to his commanding officers.

So, politics is commanding and demanding something that God himself is also demanding of his people. The institution of political management attempts to form and reform people into a new identity that can see the institution as an expression of its own self-image. It does this through the shared story of myth that all are encouraged to believe in with all their *fides*.

According to a number of sociologists of religion, consent is really about sharing a common *fides* through a common myth. In this way the best source of power comes from the best mythmakers or storytellers who can integrate us into a story of an "us" who are all on the same benevolent mission of accomplishing truth, justice, and the common good for all humanity according to *our* logic.

Conclusion

What we should realize from this situation is that the heart of political power lies within the hearts and minds of people themselves and those myths to which they give their *fides*. As Christians, we might then think about the Greatest Commandment or the *Shema*—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul/mind, and with all your strength. In other words, the Triune God alone deserves our *fides*. Political power is the arena within which the manufacture of idols and consent go hand in hand. Isaiah 40 links the manufacture of idols with the claims of nations to self-importance. In 40:17 we read that God views the nations as "less than nothing and emptiness" and in 40:18 the writer asks, "To whom then will you liken God?" That is, what personified form do the nations present to compete with Yahweh? Verse 19 says, "An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains..." Isaiah sees through the claims of the nations and their self-images of gods as nothing more than human constructs. Humans fashion their own chains by making their own gods and submitting to them with all their *fides*.

Power is simply another way of describing consent, which is itself a whole-person notion of *fides* or faith. A realistic understanding of modern political power thus has many resonances with Scripture. Human power is the vain raging of the nations which God laughs at and holds in derision.¹⁰ And we as Christians have two responses to this:

1. Love the Lord your God alone (*sola fides*) and
2. Love your neighbor with the love and character of Jesus.

These two commandments hold within them both a rejection of idolatrous *fides* demanded by all political power systems, and a positive method for combating them with love in the character of Jesus shown in Philippians 2, which Paul calls the "mind of Christ." And so, in loving our neighbors and enemies, we combat the "sound and fury, signifying nothing"¹¹ that are claims to human power. Without open rebellion, without violent means, the love of God is what confronts the meaninglessness of idolatry expressed through power struggles.

And here is the truth of Christ-centered politics—

1. Humans are not social or political animals. They are created in love, for love, and to show the love of God.
2. In sin, human loves are misdirected and disordered (Augustine).
3. Misdirected human love demands management through governments who take up a godlike demand for *fides*. More often than not, this management multiplies misdirected love.

¹⁰ Psalm 2.

¹¹ Shakespeare, *MacBeth*.

4. Rightly ordered love of God and neighbor needs no law or government, for it is written upon the heart.¹²
5. Christians submit to masters out of Christ's love for the master, not out of *fides* to their claims of rightful power,¹³ taking our freedom from mastery when the opportunity comes,¹⁴ and seeking to never be put under a yoke of slavery¹⁵ that comes through being managed by *fides* to human powers. We live as free, not to cover evil, but to reveal service to God.¹⁶
6. Finally, we have no fear because "perfect love casts out fear" as fear has to do with punishment.¹⁷ We do not consent to threats out of fear,¹⁸ we boldly proclaim and demonstrate the love of God.

A Christlike theory of power is thus rooted in a rejection of manufacturing consent, of rejecting willingly participating in our own subjection to political management (contractarianism). Instead of pursuing the common good, we love our neighbors. In this way we have the mind of Christ who, having all power did not seek to use it to overpower others, but became a servant even to the point of death on the cross.¹⁹

¹² Jeremiah 31:33. By "heart" Hebrew can indicate the whole of the inner life of a person, not necessarily only the part of a human that is responsible for feeling.

¹³ Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:21.

¹⁵ Galatians 5:1.

¹⁶ 1 Peter 2:16.

¹⁷ 1 John 4:18.

¹⁸ Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4.

¹⁹ Philippians 2.

Part II: Implications

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Chapter 11

The Political Theological Conversation

The Strategic Goal

How do we put this conversation together into something we can take away to use in our daily lives and ministries? The hope of the *implications* section is to arrive at some theological points we can use to transform our engagement with the world. If we think in terms of military or political strategy, Part I was a strategic assessment of our situation. We've taken stock of what our authority (the Bible) wants from us, what we've been inclined to do and think in the past (Reformed and Evangelical tradition), and what challenges we face in our context of the wider world.

Now we must focus on a larger strategy that we can, in Part III, begin to apply tactically to particular situations. What potential theological strategies could we advance to broadly get us where we want to go?

First, we need to be absolutely clear about where we do want to go. What is our goal? If the goal is to *build* the kingdom of God, then we will simply need to restate older visions of Christian political engagement. But the Bible will be standing against just such a goal, for there is no biblical foundation for the belief that the kingdom of God is a cooperative building project. While 1 Corinthians 3 uses cooperative building language, it is clear in this context that Paul is talking about the building of a body-politic or a community, not an institution. This kind of house or temple building language accesses exactly what Jesus described with the temple—that he would tear it down and rebuild it in his own flesh. The “building” is the body-politic of Christ, not the institutional structure of an eternal kingdom within which we hold standardized offices. This has been the error of Christendom. It is an error of confusing the people or community with the institution. The Roman Catholic Church and established Protestant ones alike believed that institutional forms could represent the body of Christ, thus confusing the church with the institution of the kingdom of God. Rather, it is the body-politic alone, the community of people, whose lives are devoted to discipleship of Jesus, that “builds” the body. So, the co-work that we share with Jesus is evangelism, discipleship, and community formation.

We might imagine that our goal is to advance the day of judgment—like Jonah glorying in preaching condemnation of the world, and becoming bitter when God does not arrive in judgment according to our calendars. We might so desire holiness for our communities that we forget that the body of Christ has a mission of ambassadorship and reconciliation, not simply prophetic announcement of impending doom.

The goal of the kingdom of God is to announce, reveal, and represent the kingdom of God, be salt and light, to be a city on a hill, to offer a taste of the goodness of God's coming reign. This strategic goal leaves the work of judgment in God's hands. It involves both a retreat to holiness (set-apartness), and an advance in revelatory mission with prepared and equipped disciples.

Jesus tells us what this means politically— "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."¹

Strategies of the Serpent

Jesus was certainly aware of the satanic or devilish connotations in speaking of being wise as serpents. Genesis 3:1 describes the serpent as "crafty" or "shrewd." And the New Testament is clear that this chief serpent holds dominion over the world.² In moving into enemy territory, we must read the enemy's operations manual, know how to speak the language, what people value. Although church institutions have often been integrated into the world and permeated with the evils of the age, seen in an almost constant news stream of famous Christian leaders engaged in a variety of usually sexual scandals, this has happened because the Christian community has been overly innocent. We have trusted human leaders and systems, handing off responsibility and maturity to others.

The wise serpent knows that he or she can trust no one. The world of politics is well described by people like Hobbes (a war of all against all) or Machiavelli (the first object of holding power is to stay in power). More modern thinkers have highlighted the necessity of propaganda in democratic societies, the importance of explanatory myths, constant diversion, breakdown of networks of meaningful communication that could form alternative loyalties.³ While it is easy to see the oppression of nations like China, there is no reason to be naive about the realities in our own lands. It is vital that the church understands the nature of the "gods" of our modern social order. While we are constantly told that we are a free people, we are entirely dependent on a relatively few incredibly large corporations for our basic necessities—food, shelter, clothing, as well as those things that form our desires and give value to our lives—travel, self-image, ownership of products, etc. We are being *constantly* formed or disciplined, often in ways we can barely perceive, so normal are they.⁴

¹ Matthew 10:16.

² 1 John 5:19.

³ See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*.

⁴ A short reading list includes most anything by Jacques Ellul, Niel Postman, Marshal McLuhan, Ivan Illich, or William Cavanaugh.

The wise serpent knows the power of deflection, or of misdirection. Enemies are often manufactured to galvanize a people to bind together under some party or person's leadership. Conspiracy theories are invented to hide the mundane nature of daily evils that benefit a few people. "Bread and circuses" was a critique of the late Roman Empire by the Roman thinker Juvenal. The Roman Empire handed out a daily dole of food rations to the people and provided them with near constant entertainment to divert them from any notion of banding together to rebel against oppression. So both Jews and the early Christians generally avoided Roman entertainment, instead often becoming the entertainment themselves as they were tortured as scapegoats for the pleasure of audiences. The serpent works in just this way, "amusing ourselves to death."⁵

Until we are sanguine about these realities and perceive how we are constantly being used for someone else's agenda, most especially those who command our *fides*, like political parties, we will end up as pawns. For the church to be wise as a serpent, it must develop its faculty of suspicion.

Cultivating Innocence

The path to freedom lies not simply in tearing up the rules of the world and disobeying them. The path to freedom comes by being like an intentional child who, knowing the ways of the world, nevertheless chooses innocence. "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."⁶ Paul tells us that we must be "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."⁷

A childlike innocence is not simply being ignorant of evil, it is having radical trust in the Father to provide and protect us as a good shepherd. Innocence is founded upon the sovereignty of God, and thus it belongs to the life of the people of God together. The kingdom of God belongs to the children, not to the wise and crafty serpents. There is no room for manipulative strategy in the life of the Christian community. Church institutions are not places that exist to educate leaders of the world, nor do the leadership lessons of the serpentine world apply to the people of God.

Innocence is not about protecting and perpetuating ignorance in isolation, but something to cultivate by practice together. Innocence is a kind of relationship we have with one another, full of genuine trust and care. It is the supreme risk of entering the kingdom. It requires that we carry one another's burdens and protect one another from the wolves in our midst. We cannot depend on systems and structures alone, but must cultivate relationships of

⁵ The title of a book by Niel Postman (1985).

⁶ Luke 18:17.

⁷ Philippians 2:15.

accountability. For Paul, this meant the Corinthian church should be more ready and willing to suffer losses and wrongs than to appeal to outside courts for justice against each other.⁸

The image of Christian maturity is seen in Jesus on the cross. The all-powerful God who could stand up to the temptations of the serpent and see through them, nevertheless chose to deal with sin and rebellion personally as the innocent one. Our political strategy must bear witness to this childlike innocence that comes through maturity, not ignorance. And our discipleship must aim toward innocence through understanding. Innocence is a choice made by the strong, and it thus merges the wisdom of age, the strength of youth, and the beauty of the young child. It is a beauty of character that we must reveal to the world. It may earn us persecution now, for the serpent hates nothing more than the incorruptible. But on the day of judgment we are promised that they will glorify God for us.⁹

Discipleship is the Strategy

Nearly all of our historical political theology and practice comes from a period of time in which nations identified culturally as Christian and the church institution had some influence. The vast majority of political theological strategies are focused on *institutional strategy* rather than on the character of discipleship. When churches have power of hope of power, top-down methods are the most efficient and most often pursued. It is inefficient to deal with cultivating wise, strong, mature, and innocent disciples. Nevertheless, this was Jesus' own political strategy for growing his kingdom people.

The time has passed for older political theological strategies that focus on institutional goals, institutional methods, and institutional formation. The political theologies of those periods are no longer true, useful, or helpful. The time has come to stand up to the pressure of politics with a robust biblical theology. That theology unmask the ambitions of power, It discerns how institutions themselves are not static creations of God, but always ratcheting toward centralization of power. It shows how human rebellion is institutionalized in ways that remove personal responsibility from us. These institutions weaken us, they do not require character formation, but teach us to make constant demands for personal rights to express ourselves. Sadly, the example of the "metaverse"—with its vision of a world we can radically transform and a self-image we can make up for ourselves digitally—only serves to reveal how disempowered and unfree people are today. We have people who are desperate to live in a fantasy because they can seemingly make no difference in reality. This was the very critique of Christianity by Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. The problem wasn't Jesus, it was a vision of an otherworldly afterlife that allowed those serpents in power to continue in their exploitation. Now is the time for discipleship to become our strategy, because its vision of maturity stands in radical contrast to that of the wish-projection of the metaverse.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 6.

⁹ See Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12.

Older institutional political theologies held that God established and rules creation in an institutional capacity, delegating his rule through various powers and institutions. This is an imperial model.

The biblical truth is that God is operative in human history through a chosen people who are to be established as co-rulers of yet-to-come kingdom. This is an exilic, ambassadorial model. A renewed biblical political theology will move from justifying institutions and authority claims of office holders, to acting as representatives of Jesus in his earthly ministry as formed disciples. A Christendom theology focuses on vocation, on fulfilling roles in existing institutions. A biblical theology focuses on placing ourselves within a story and on a journey toward maturity in Christ without the assurance of vocational stability.

So, what do we do with institutions, particularly church institutions? They are and have always functioned as tools. They can aid a community in performing regular tasks with great efficiency and in a kind of mindless manner.¹⁰ The problem with institutions like with any form of tool is that the more elaborate we make the tool, the less skill the user needs, and the more standardized the output. A 3D printer or CNC mill can make incredibly elaborate and precise parts for jet engines that humans cannot with manual machines. But this turns many craftspeople into button-pushers. Engineers now perform design work and the less individuality a machine operator displays, the better. Churches and states are similarly becoming this kind of machine where social engineers create pre-programmed scripts that machine operators enact through engaging merely in voting, or in church attendance. We may need to fundamentally rethink what we imagine by the word “church” to move away from the institution or tool and toward the community of disciples who must learn by apprenticeship rather than programming. Only in this way will we create disciples who are strong, wise, and innocent enough to engage with different worldly contexts with the creativity of a skilled craftsman. If our institutions serve the community, they may be reinvented, taken up, set down, and replaced when needed. Institutions always exist in any community, but they don’t have to exist *in this way*. Church institutions exist to aid in making disciples, disciples do not exist to serve an institution.

Tactics

In terms of engaging in the political arena, this does not mean that individual disciples cannot or should not participate, only that we should be sending ambassadors and ambassadorial communities rather than church institutions modeled on political institutional forms. We should engage in no coalitions or alliances. Paul is abundantly clear about this in 2 Corinthians 6:14, as are the prophets of the Old Testament. We must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers because, in order to pursue a common good with those who deny the kingship

¹⁰ See Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Open Road: 1967), II.1 for a sociological analysis of how institutionalization happens by means of habitualized actions performed by specific actors.

of Jesus, we must make Jesus of secondary importance to the proposed common good. There must be no fellowship (common identity) between Christ and Belial, between light and dark.

But are there lesser lights, or reflected lights in the world in the form of people who have understood Christian-derived principles with whom the greater light of Jesus can ally? That is a question that a number of 20th century theologians struggled with, notably Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While both Bonhoeffer and Barth acknowledge goods outside the realm of the revelation of Scripture, this did not lead them to see those goods as necessarily directing to Christ. Similarly, CS Lewis believed that all human religions and myths possessed elements of truth within them, which all pointed to the “true myth” of Christianity. However, even if there are penultimate goods outside of the church, this serves only as a point of contact for a mission of ambassadorship, not a building-block of a united community that forgoes identity transformation. However good other organizations and institutions are in the world, Christ alone must be the cornerstone, and any allegiance that tries to be foundational with Christ is faithless idolatry—making Christ and Belial into fellows.

Questions like these are complicated. How do we evaluate the goodness of some other belief that rejects the lordship of Jesus? How do we talk and work with this or that people group in our context? The answers require wise disciples to work without the aid of systematic answers. Should we be totally, always and forever, pacifist, or are there times where killing for defense must happen? This is a question people like Bonhoeffer and Jacques Ellul wrestled against. I believe Ellul provided a satisfying answer to this and many of these kinds of questions—we are free in Christ to do what we think is best in our context, but we should never try to *justify* or excuse our own actions. Violence is never justifiable, Ellul thought, but that doesn’t mean it’s never necessary.¹¹ So it is with our political involvement. We are free in Christ, but we must be both wise enough to not make blanket judgments about the goodness of our causes, or to demand others think the same exact way we do. And we should never use Jesus to justify the world or its visions of justice, no matter how many similarities there are to Jesus’ own justice.

All of our political actions must be submitted to the ultimate goal and mission of revealing the kingdom of God to the darkened world. Those actions, alliances, and perspectives that do not aid this goal should be viewed with suspicion. Likewise, anything that does not lead us to be formed more into Christlike maturity and innocence are antithetical to discipleship and what we are called to be.

This means we should not give up responsibility by demanding political rights. We should not seek protection from a paternalistic state that can isolate us from danger. We find protection in relationships formed by loving our enemies.

And in all things, we should be looking for opportunities to use our maturity and wisdom to train and equip others. For, this is a kind of political tactic of its own, and one that

¹¹ Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (Wipf and Stock, 2012).

Jesus made great use of in his own ministry. It was not Jesus in his earthly ministry who spread the kingdom throughout the Roman Empire, but the followers of his followers.

Discipleship is politics. But political engagement rarely (if ever) makes disciples of Jesus.

Chapter 12

Politics of Sabbath

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Note: ECO's Theological Task Force for the writing of a New Theology Document released a draft of their document for consideration by the Synod at the National Gathering of 2023. This chapter is based on the theology contained in that document.

Although God commanded Sabbath-keeping, these commands were intended to be signs that reveal and participate in the reality of God's kingdom, where God lives and reigns in the fullness of space and time with us. This is our goal, our hope, and our mission of revelation to the world. God will make his home with us and we, along with all of creation, will be transformed.

What does this mean for political engagement on a practical level today? Let's compare some themes of politics with the themes of Sabbath from that new theology document.

Politics is social management. Sabbath is freedom.

Politics seeks to simplify people into categories that can be managed. In this management, people band together in coalitions to gain and maintain power. This form of management constantly trends toward centralization and a ratcheting up of control. In the end, politics aims to reduce human diversities.

Where God is king, by contrast, there is freedom.¹ God frees people to set other people free,² not so that they can be trained to be better managed. The freedom God gives is by a kind of non-management that is called "love" in the Bible. Love is a kind of relationship that aims to build up the other, to lead other people to maturity and mutuality. Love preserves diversity because it is rooted in the God who loves each individual sparrow and knows individual stars, grains of sand, and hairs on each person's head. God loves particular things, not categories. God's love is not management or simplification, it is liberation. Thus, when God claims his kingship over all things, the community of all creation is upheld by the love of God and not by the management of simplified systems.³

¹ See Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 3:17.

² See Deuteronomy 5:15, 15; Jeremiah 34.

³ The story of Job is instructive here. Job's friends seek simple answers that turn the world into a predictable system. In the end, God rebukes Job's friends and reveals that he created a creation far beyond human ability to understand or control, and that God delights in wild things that cause fear in human hearts. The love of God establishes wildness and freedom, rather than controlling it.

Politics defines people by dependence and independence using misleading language like “freedom” to describe a kind of independence where each person has rights of protection guaranteed by the force of law and punishment, to live a life guided by a narrow set of self-determined goods. The dependence/independence binary suggests that, with theorists like Hobbes, life without government management is a near total-war of individuals. There is no community or love, only fear and security.

Sabbath, by contrast, sees dependence and independence as a false dichotomy that comes as a fruit of fear. Perfect love casts out fear.⁴ The love of God that his people reveal to the world is not about creating dependence or moral children who need strong institutions and strong codes of morality as a crutch. Rather, God proclaims the “law of liberty”⁵ that creates a people who are individuals strong enough to love one another even in and through our failures, weaknesses, and sins. This strength of maturity is the character of Jesus himself, our one true king.⁶

Sabbath thus teaches us how to be strong enough to be mutually interdependent. This mutuality doesn’t require management.⁷ We carry one another’s burdens willingly,⁸ not by force of law or by taxation. We depend upon God and his creation rather than on artificial human social technologies, like institutions or governmental methods. For, it is by adapting to God’s creation that we are strengthened, made unique, and find our joy in helping others.⁹

Myth and Faith

Politics seeks subjects, citizens, and obedient loyalists who find their identity in an artificially constructed nation. It weaponizes belief, turning myths into calls to arms for the benefit of a ruling class.¹⁰ The King who is love redeems myth and belief, restoring them to their proper function of inspiring the people of God to love one another just as God has loved us.¹¹

⁴ 1 John 4:18.

⁵ James 1:25, 2:12.

⁶ Ephesians 4:13.

⁷ So in the new covenant there is no need of teachers and authorities in Jeremiah 31:34. Likewise, Jesus’ teachings about calling no man “rabbi” or “father” shows that God alone is the authority of the wise and mature, Matthew 23:8–12.

⁸ Galatians 6:2.

⁹ See Philippians 2:2.

¹⁰ See Isaiah 2:20–22; Daniel 3.

¹¹ “The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make... For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it.” J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins: 2001), 54.

Sabbath practices are acts of mythical time. They point to and participate in a not-yet time. This is not an untrue time, but it is a time foreign to the ways of this world. Sabbath practices are acts of living in a fantastic and mysterious world where the laws of the artificial reality of the “natural” world of human civilization are untrue. Sabbath is a continual and regular questioning of those “truths” that “we hold to be self-evident.” Life in God’s kingdom is not a war of all against all (Hobbes), not a place where humans are by nature prone to truck and barter for the best deal (Adam Smith), not a place where thriving comes by institutionalization and labor specialization, i.e. work. Life in God’s kingdom is a place of peace where acts of aggression are met with laughter and derision,¹² where money and acquisition are useless,¹³ where honor is given to one another for righteousness rather than infamy,¹⁴ and where identity is not found in labor or production but in relationships of love and mutual aid.¹⁵ This is a fantastic kingdom when compared with our experience, and yet it is our regular life experience that is a twisted fantasy world of the domain of darkness built on myths about money, power, or treasures that moth and rust destroy.¹⁶

Modern politics seeks to make a name for a people, to give them an identity. Sabbath is about learning that identity comes from relationships that dwell together in time, not in common causes or visions of the justice, noble as these myths may be. Sabbath is about realizing that our end, our purpose, our goal, does not come by cleverly crafted schemes, but by God alone—in part through his maturing or sanctification of his people.

Getting Practical

Now, all of this may sound aethereal. How do we live a myth in a mysterious time that has not yet come? If there’s one thing we can learn from postmodernism, it’s that *all of politics is already a myth that demands our faith and the mythmakers are untrustworthy*. Practically speaking, the call of Sabbath is a call to pledge our allegiance to Jesus. Sabbath is a call to break down the walls that separate human life into spheres of dominion where human artificial technologies, like states and multinational corporations, are given free rein to do with God’s creation and God’s people whatever they like, so long as they allow individual freedom of interior spirituality. God has not delegated his authority to human social technologies. God, in his patience, has allowed his authority to be flaunted by human individuals, communities, and

¹² Psalm 2:4.

¹³ Isaiah 55:1–2

¹⁴ See Romans 2:7–10, 12:10.

¹⁵ See Matthew 11:30; Galatians 6:2.

¹⁶ Tolkien continues the above quote, “Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors’ own evil. But they have also made false gods out of other materials: their nations, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice.” “On Fairy Stories”, 55.

institutions. The church does not exist to justify this rebellion, but to reveal the good news of what it looks like when and where God is king.

Thus, Sabbath demands that the people of God band together and find their primary identity in Christ together. Sabbath demands that the church rediscover what God created it to be in Abraham and expanded it to be in Christ: a real and true people of God, set apart from the world, for the sake of the world. Being in-Christ is being welcomed not into a spiritual (or “unreal”) family, but into a born-again-by-the-Spirit family who leave all other allegiances to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship.

The practical call of Sabbath is quite simple, then. We must tell, live, and show the story of God that is summarized by “Sabbath.” Thus, the call is to practice the Sabbath in its fullness as a community that spends enough time together to count as a primary social group. Our church institutions are generally quite far from realizing this. We don’t even practice the Sabbath in its most basic forms, let alone in a way that is a blazing sign to the world saying, “Taste and see that the Lord is good!”¹⁷ No matter, we must begin somewhere.

So, where can we begin on a journey toward revealing the kingdom of God? A few practical questions for institutional leaders to reflect upon could be helpful:

1. One of the best places to begin as the leader of an institution is to rethink of the institution as a social technology, a product of engineering. So, look at the code of your institution and ask what results it is designed to produce. If your church successfully did what it was designed to do (not necessarily what it *claims or wants* to do), what would it look like?
 - a. Does success look like numerical institutional growth? If so, to what end? Weeds grow better than wheat, but weeds don’t nourish. So too growth is irrelevant without a purpose to that growth.
 - b. Does success look like better worship with more passion? If so, to what end? How does this worship create mature disciples, and how does it reveal to the world the kingdom of God, especially if the world isn’t walking in the doors to worship?
2. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”¹⁸ Are your institutional treasures in the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Where do you invest the majority of your budget and pastoral time?
3. What is your church institution’s vision? Why does your church exist? To provide a value-add to the interior spiritual lives of individuals? To reveal the kingdom of God in your local community together by training mature disciples of Jesus Christ?
4. What are the major friction points in your church institution? Where do people in your church find their most important identities, and what would it take to have that answer be “Jesus Christ as modelled by our lives together”?

¹⁷ Psalm 34:8.

¹⁸ Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34.

5. What does a Sabbath-formed community look like in your context? How might you re-program or re-engineer your social technology (church institution) to move from where you are to that point?

The answer to these questions forms starting points to think in practical ways about how to make directed changes. Reallocating a budget, rethinking pastoral roles and job descriptions, redesigning public spaces, revising worship service formats and liturgies are all relatively small things that together can serve to “reprogram” the code of a church institution. All church institutions have a design, we ought to take responsibility for designing them to intentionally form mature disciples who uphold one another in relationships of love and mutual interdependence, and who can then be sent into the world as ambassadors of reconciliation, showing what it looks like when and where God is king.

Part III: Applications

In Part III our theology team has focused on practical and practical questions that arise in the church today. These articles are not designed to give concrete and final answers, but to provide resources to think more deeply and critically in your own context.

A Christian Nation?

GP Wagenfuhr

Question: Is there or can there be such a thing as a Christian nation?

Answer: Yes and No.

America is often said to be a “Christian nation” just as many nations of Europe were before it. Behind this concept is really a question of essential identity—that being American means to be Christian in some sense—and that therefore America should act authentically by being Christian.

Hidden behind this idea of a “Christian nation” are many details and distinctions that lead us to that often unsatisfying answer of yes and no.

The World's Story

Firstly, let's wear our political science or sociology hat, and revisit the distinction between a state and a nation. A state is a governing institution. A nation is an amorphous people group. A state exists by rules, regulations, techniques, offices and officers. A nation exists in language, culture, story, and value. There has never been a Christian state, a “theocracy” as it were.¹ The kingdom of God is the only Christian state and we must never confuse the states of the world with the kingdom of God, something that European states have sometimes done (but probably less often than we might believe).

But there have been many nations or people groups that have been culturally shaped by Christian theology, worship, practice, and church institutions. In this sense, a “Christian nation” is a nation whose primary cultural influence is some aspect of Christianity. The Bible

¹ Where we might point to the rule of God over Israel through the Judges as an example of a theocracy, the reality is this did not represent an institutionalized governance. Similarly with Moses, in spite of the laws of Torah, the picture we get in the Torah itself is of tribal affiliations and tribal elders with Moses as the chief judge in cases too hard for tribal leaders to discern. Again, there doesn't seem to be a rigid institutional structure.

has always been just one influence among many others in the complexities of culture. Paul didn't stop being a Jew when he became a Jesus-follower, nor did the Ethiopian eunuch cease to be Ethiopian. European Christianity has always been part of the very complex tapestry of intermingling cultural threads. After all, some of our most basic cultural structures resisted Christianization for thousands of years, like the days of the week (Germanic/Norse gods in English) and holidays. Reading through the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731 AD) shows just how alien a culture Christian England in the middle ages is to us, and perhaps most of all in its form of Christianity.

This distinction between the nation and the state is more helpful, I think, than the distinction between the sacred (church) and the secular (state). For, what really is desired in the notion of a Christian nation is that Christian values would significantly guide both a people group and their state institutions. "America"² has been a Christian *nation* in that sense of the word. Christianity has been one major factor in the cultural identity of many of the peoples who have made up the national identity of "America." But what's different from older European models is that the state of the USA constitutionally disestablishes the church as an institution and more recently restricts God-talk from the public square. This state decision has had a long-term impact on the culture of the nation by disempowering God-talk and thus also any values that are derived from it. Now, values must be stripped of their relation to the divine, something secularists are happy to do.

The real question is, then, should Christianity have a privileged position in value-formation of the American people? Historically its influence on the state came by the strength of its cultural legacy in European immigrants. Today, these cultural identities have significantly shifted globally to no longer be Christian in many ways. If we want Christianity to have a privileged place of value it would either have to convert the majority of the American people over many generations, or amend the Constitution to give privilege to specific *sources of values* not necessarily represented by the majority of the people. Obviously, the pursuit of transforming power structures sounds a lot easier than a mass movement of evangelism and discipleship. So, that's tended to be the political tactic of Christians. This has tended to grate against non-Christians who see this as an illegitimate overreach, a violation of democratic principles.

² I use the word "America" in quotation marks to indicate that this is a national identity, not the institution of the United States of *America*, which by its title claims to be the institution that represents a geographically defined people group: Americans. While this may sound ethnocentric to Canadians, Mexicans, and all of South Americans, that's kind of the point... ethnic identities must be ethnocentric to exist in any meaningful way. To reject ethnocentrism is to accept a form of statism in which identity is assigned by institutions rather than by culture—that is, base imperialism.

Bible and Theology

Now, let's consider the question theologically. Should there be a Christian nation? Yes—that's called the "church." Jesus commissioned his people, as God did Abraham, to become a great nation/people group. Jesus' people are transnational and trans-state. They are to make a Jesus-shaped identity primary and make their commitments to their people group of less importance.³ Biblically speaking, we should probably say that the church is the body-politic of the state of the kingdom of God. The church is the organic people group, ingrafted into the children of Abraham, all of whom are adopted into the house of God. Indeed, not only does the Old Testament specifically talk about the covenant with Abraham as the creation of a people group, Jesus in the New Testament expands this through his discussions with Nicodemus in John 3. The language of being "born again" is not about an experience of spiritual awakening, but a new paternity that is from God through the Spirit.⁴ This new paternity gives birth to a new *natio* or birth-order or genealogy. We have one Father, and a peoplehood/family/tribal/national identity through Jesus.⁵ We have to remember that in Jesus' day Caesar saw himself as the *paterfamilias* (legal father) of the household of Rome. So when Jesus says that we are to call no man on earth father, because we have only one Father, he shows that loyalty and identity belong in God, not in the state.

The nation of the body of Christ is not made up of people by birthright, however, but by *pistis* or "faith." Again, faith is too weak a word for what the New Testament means by it. A holistic combination of belief, faith, loyalty, and obedience is what the Bible means by "faith." So, from that perspective, Christian values without loyalty to God are a form of idolatry and rebellion. Jesus is our Lord, not our influencer.

Can there be a Christian state? Should the church as a people group seek to institutionalize into a political body? No. It cannot do this without ceasing to be the church. This is not because the church is only spiritual, but because the church can only have one Lord, Jesus Christ,⁶ and he does not delegate his authority to rule his body, instead, he gives the command to serve.⁷

Conclusion

So, can there be a Christian nation? Sociologically speaking, yes, there are values derived from Christianity and the Bible that have been a primary influence among different people groups. But from a biblical perspective that is not enough to really qualify as

³ See for example: Matthew 8:21–22; 10:34–37; Luke 14:26; Galatians 3:28.

⁴ Paul makes this interpretation more clearly in Romans 8:14.

⁵ See Matthew 23:9.

⁶ See Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 1:22, 4:4–6.

⁷ Matthew 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–46.

“Christian.” Doing good works and having good cultural values are not bad things, but it is not the same thing as *pistis* or discipleship. Christianity without whole-life loyalty to Jesus is no Christianity at all. In that sense there cannot be a nation that identifies as Christian. Instead, the only Christian nation is the people group formed by Jesus, his body, the church.

Both sociological history and theology agree (for different reasons) that there has never been and cannot be a truly Christian state.

Thus, if the political motive is to help America be more authentically itself by rediscovering Judeo-Christian values that may have been present at its founding, this motive would be better served by demonstrations of the superiority of these values and clear articulations of how current values lead to social and institutional breakdown. Authenticity to a few of the Christian founding fathers and their moral principles is not a democratic political principle for governance. Authenticity is a cultural argument about retaining an ethnic identity, and if this ethnic identity excludes much of the population of the state of the United States of America today, it naturally is not an ethnic identity that will be well-received.

But we should be circumspect about any success in regaining some form of American foundational authenticity. To make America Christian in values again is not the work Jesus has given to his followers who are to make *disciples*. The pursuit of value transformation is not about the values themselves, or about the good life, but about creating contexts in which these values are a natural or Spirit-led outcome rather than a course of formation. Values are rarely formed by intentional effort and force, they are desired as the fruit of love. Disciples love their master, but those who obey Christian values out of fear of punishment or hell have not been given the whole gospel.⁸

⁸ 1 John 4:18.

Flags in the Sanctuary

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith

"Thank you for meeting with me, pastor. I really need to address a concern I have."

"You're welcome, how can I help you?"

"Pastor. I need to tell you something that's really bothering me. You took the flag out of the sanctuary and I just don't know why you'd do that. It's been there for decades."

"When did you see the flag gone?"

"About two weeks ago. As soon as I saw it, I made the appointment to talk with you."

"Well, I'm glad we can talk, but I have to be honest, I didn't take the flag out. That was two pastors ago. It was removed in 2005. It's been fourteen years."

That conversation happened. While it comes with a humor, many churches might have different experiences. Some members might notice the week flags are moved. Or, perhaps, the flag or flags were out of the sanctuary following the weekend of Vacation Bible School and someone noticed and left a note of concern.

In our current landscape, there are conversations over the appropriateness of national flags in the sanctuary. Is this the right place? How does this demonstrate the heavenly kingdom? Do churches need to demonstrate patriotism? *Christianity Today* published a roundtable of pastors and theologians who discussed the issue from their perspective. Occasionally, newspapers publish letters to the editor like "Shame on Churches Who Don't Fly the American Flag!"¹ Maybe some of our churches wonder why we have flags in the sanctuary. How did we get to this place where the American flag is prominent in so many churches?

Prior to the US Civil War, historians have noted that it was a rare occurrence to find a national flag in an American church. As the nation experienced heightened tensions once the fragile republic inched toward war, many Northern clergy used loyalty to the Union, including the American flag as a testy way to differentiate themselves from Southern churches.

For example, we know the Gardiner Spring Resolutions passed by the 1861 Presbyterian Church USA General Assembly required loyalty to the Union and US Constitution. This led to schism and the, later, creation of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. Yet, after the nation was reunified, the Presbyterian Church remained apart until 1983.

During this same period, the American flag was used as a symbol of antagonism toward Southern clergy and churches. In *Politics of Faith During the Civil War*, Timothy Wesley

¹ <https://www.thenewsstar.com/story/opinion/2019/07/19/letters-shame-churches-who-dont-fly-american-flag/1744148001/>

recounts the story of Methodist clergy in Missouri hanging the American flag in a Confederate sympathizing Methodist congregation. Enraged, one of the church ladies ripped the flag apart!

Between the Civil War and World War I, there is not a lot of evidence to support widespread displays of American flags in sanctuaries. Many Southern churches, as noted in Charles Reagan Wilson's seminal work, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause*, took the opportunities of rebuilding to integrate the memory of the Confederacy into their stained glass, holidays, and civic religion. Throughout the US, however, rapid immigration from non-white groups, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox alarmed those who believed the country should be peopled by Anglo-Saxon Protestant families.

A greater push for a national identity led toward the creation of The Pledge of Allegiance, in 1892 by the Christian Socialist Francis Bellamy, who wanted to inculcate immigrant children with loyalty to their new nation. The first immigration law was passed in 1894, The Chinese Exclusion Act, that barred Asian immigrants. The Ku Klux Klan experienced growth and expanded in influence and scope as it spread a message of the need for a white, Protestant nation. As World War I loomed several issues created the push for American flags in Christian sanctuaries.

First, anti-immigrant sentiment peaked during the 1910s. The desire for racial purity led to the 1917 Immigration Act that barred all non-white and "undesirable" immigrants. It also required an English literacy test. This meant to restrict immigration from nearly all Europe that was not English speaking, therefore slowing Roman Catholic and Orthodox immigration from the East. Second, nativists began to pressure churches to fly American flags.

Second, preachers like Billy Sunday delivered a hard message of 100% Americanism. American churches differentiated themselves from non-American churches through the display of signs and symbols of the nation. The KKK even distributed American flags in churches throughout the South and Midwest with one Klansman declaring in a letter to a Methodist pastor, "the two greatest gifts from heaven are the Bible and the American flag."

Lutheran and Dutch Reformed churches found themselves targeted with violence if they did not display American flags. In fact, German pastors who did not fly the flag were forced to genuflect and kiss it publicly or face violent retribution. Dutch Reformed pastor/theologian, Hermann Hoeksma refused to fly a flag in the sanctuary and suffered death threats for treason, called a Communist, and a local newspaper editorial declared he should be shot or ran out of town.

The years between the First and Second World Wars various issues tested the meddle of the US. There was the first Red Scare. This led to the increase of patriotic preaching as communism was considered atheistic. The Great Depression called Americans to look for God for help and deliverance. Even President Franklin Roosevelt was viewed in religious terms by many seeking economic deliverance.

The Second World War increased patriotism and religiosity. Religious and civic symbolism were intertwined in many places not including Christian worship services. The most notable example might be the FDR Military Issue Bible. It was a small Gideons' style New

Testament. The inside had a graphic of the American flag under the Christian flag. There was a note from the President encouraging Bible reading. It also contained three stanzas of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Following the Second World War, the US entered the peak of civil religion. President Dwight Eisenhower declared the US and Soviet Union were not simply locked into a Cold War, but a spiritual one. Church growth rates outpaced the birth rate. Billy Graham’s crusades attracted millions throughout the world, and prominently featured American flags. The US Pledge of Allegiance had the phrase “under God” added in 1954, the same year the national motto became “In God We Trust.” Americanism and Christianity became nearly inseparable among white Protestant and Catholic spaces.

Owing to this long story, many of our churches have this national symbol in our sanctuary. The Roman Catholic Church advised its churches it was permissible to display the flag, however not in the sanctuary. Anabaptist groups repudiate the entwining of man’s kingdom with God’s. Some immigrant churches heartily embrace the flag. Some do not. For African Americans, the flag is complicated based on a long, sordid history and the images American symbols evoke.

In *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Francis Schaeffer observed that sanctuaries with the American flag have symbols of competing loyalties, yet in this presentation it shows no conflict, even synthesis. There is the symbol of Caesar, the State, in harmony with the signs and symbols of the Kingdom of God: the cross, the Word, and the Sacraments. Schaeffer warned of this—there may be a time in which the church is the enemy, and we need to be clear that the kingdom of man is always below the Kingdom of God. Our greater loyalty is to Jesus because we are first citizens of heaven.

Therefore, there are many different reasons for and against having a national flag in the sanctuary. Knowing more about its history and theological reasons can help your church’s session use conversations about the flag as a way to talk about deeper theological issues in your church community.

(How) Should I (We) Vote?

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Let's consider the question of voting from the theological method we've been working through in this book. First, we'll look at political realities, then we'll consider Scripture, then theology, and see what comes from this conversation.

Political Realities

First and foremost, voting is an expression of power that has been delegated to the people by the ruling institution. Voting is a form of legally binding consultation of the rulers with their constituency. In this way, a well-run legal vote is an act of legitimation or validation of both the structure of an institution, and the candidates who are on the ballot. Illegal votes reveal how it is a method of using power to gain legitimacy. Russia in 2014 held a referendum in Crimea to annex it after having secretly invaded it and usurped its government. A similar vote was held in four regions it had partially conquered in its war against Ukraine in 2022. Reports said that voting was happening in the presence of Russian soldiers and thus were coerced. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of people affirmed Russia's agenda. These kinds of votes serve to legitimize a reality established by military power. But all votes, coerced or not, regularize institutional structures. By participating in the process, people are made to share some level of responsibility in the results. Thus, the mere act of voting, regardless of what one chooses, is part of a government institution's reaffirmation of its right to rule.

Secondly, voting is often described as making one's voice heard in the public arena. Anyone familiar with the basic forms of parliamentary procedure, like *Robert's Rules*, should recognize this as problematic. A voice is the right to speak, a vote is the right to vote. In church session or congregational meetings the right to a voice is often more widely granted than the right to vote. But in larger governments, the opposite is the case. The right to vote is widespread, the right to a voice in congress, for example, is extremely limited. Thus, it is a convenient fiction to conflate voting with voice, because it enables people to feel like they have a "say." But this conflation is problematic for these reasons:

- Voting is not nuanced or individual.
Voting has to be streamlined into specific propositions or specific candidates. One's individual voice must be submitted to a coalition. In other words, to make one's voice heard, one must chant the same message with a sufficiently large crowd.
- Votes can often conceal more than they reveal, silence more than give voice.
Voting does not record motives. So, a vote is a vote, whether or not a person is fully on board or only partially. When one votes for this candidate because the other one is unconscionable, the candidate still has the full support of the system.
- Voting involves selecting simple choices like Yes/No or one of a few premade options.
- There's no such thing as a protest vote, at least not from the government's point of view.

- There can be no voting “against” someone or something by voting for the opposite. Only votes described as being “against,” like in recall votes, are against.
- There can be no vote for a “lesser of two evils.” One’s vote has no nuance, so a “lesser” evil is still a vote for an evil and a legitimization of the system that produced a situation of greater and lesser evils but no “good.” Situations in which the common good is unobtainable run against the very foundational theory of the social contractarian theories that are enshrined in the US’s founding documents.
- Spoiling a ballot to participate but protest is not an act that records any data for the government to analyze. What was the person protesting and why? Ballots are reduced to counts alone, and so they do not, in the end, communicate anything but the numbers of pre-chosen selections.
- All this means that voting is simply not the avenue for one’s political voice to be expressed. It will be forced into a coalition, into a party-line, into something that can be reduced to a box on a ballot.

Thirdly, voting for candidates is different from voting for policies. Republicanism votes on representative leaders who are entrusted with authority to make many executive decisions on behalf of the people. So-called “direct democracy” makes the people the executives who vote on nearly every issue with no leadership entrusted with executive authority, something Switzerland has to some degree. So, we should not confuse voting for candidates or parties with voting for policies. In America there are no laws that require a political candidate or party to fulfill campaign promises, or stick to published agendas. Votes for candidates empower candidates with institutional offices. This means that voting on specific referenda, often at a local or state level, is a very different matter than national elections, one that requires more research and responsibility of voter education. The danger of candidate-based voting is that it removes governing responsibility from the people, thus disempowering the people. Civic liberty is generally greater where civic responsibilities are also greater. That’s inconvenient and it doesn’t scale well to the size of the vast and complex modern nation-states of our time. So true democracy, of the kind experimented with in ancient Athens, for example, is rare. And because the power of a vote is proportional to the size of the voting pool, smaller communities are a lot more effective at direct voting than larger ones. The same can be seen in churches where large ones will only ask the congregation to vote on major issues like capital campaigns, where small churches might get a congregation’s involvement in dozens of other ways.

Fourthly, there is a temptation to reduce political involvement to a consultative government model of voting or protesting. This makes some sense where the right to a voice is generally felt to be denied from the political system. Protest is the expression of “voice” outside of a regularized consultation process. Large-scale protests should indicate to leaders that they are not addressing the issues that many people care about, or are not consulting them enough. But protest is not the same as rebellion, though it can obviously lead there. Protest is an unauthorized request of authorities to listen to and obey the voice of a coalition of people who feel underrepresented.

The problems with protesting closely mirror those of voting. They are simplified, lack nuance, and require a coalition strategy to succeed, all of which leads toward inevitable compromise and an acceptance of the "lesser evil." Protests also are rarely about demanding something make it onto a ballot. They tend to revolve around demands for specific groups that would not necessarily make it onto a ballot, or which would not succeed through voting. In some ways, then protesting has become a regularized consultative practice of modern republics. This represents a breakdown of the intended system. And this breakdown is manifest by the overwhelming complexity of modern politics that make regular voters, let alone governors, capable of understanding and intelligently managing the wide gamut of issues. Protest reveals a feeling of disenfranchisement that nevertheless still legitimizes the state as it is. Protest, at its core, is a request for action from an authority, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the authority. Protest becomes rebellion when authority is rejected and the people no longer make requests or demands, but fight for dominance. This is exactly what the Declaration of Independence stood for—the transformation of protest into a rebellion that ceased protest.

Fifthly, we must realize that to win a vote, we must be or join the majority. For us to aim at kingdom-ends we will either have to compromise on those ends, or get a majority to desire such kingdom-ends. The likelihood of the latter is slim, at least in our time. The reality is, we will be pushed inevitably into coalitions that challenge or undermine our loyalty to the kingdom of God by their demands to party-line loyalty. Coalitions between Christians and non-Christians inevitably exclude Jesus as king.

These five points show how voting and protesting are forms of non-nuanced coalition-based legitimation of institutional structures, often empowering candidates to take responsibility and power away from the people. Voting and protesting speak with coalition voices, not with nuance. To participate in voting and protesting is thus to join a crowd in speaking unanimously for a single thing. This is what a government sees as the final results and is all that it needs to work off of. For Christians this means necessary coalition strategies that will inevitably sacrifice Jesus for a broader representation. To ally with Mormons, for example, on some political issue, is to ally with historic heretics for similar political ends. One might engage in such practices rarely, but over the long-term these habitual alliances reduce the value of theological truth for political expediency. Put bluntly, coalitions lead to apostasy.

Where does this leave us? Effective voice and vote come through coalitions. Christians cannot form effective coalitions without significant theological compromise. Theological compromise reduces the value of our reason-for-being as the church.

The options seem to be compromise voting and protest with the attendant danger of apostasy, or abandoning politics... right? That is a common false dichotomy. There are numerous other ways to both speak and act politically, they just don't have the immediate large-scale results we tend to see with votes and protests. Political action can also take place on an individual level through deep and nuanced conversations. A healthy civil society will

foster this kind of diverse thinking that is not immediately drawn into the reductive coalitions represented in political parties.

Scripture

Turning to the Bible in asking whether and how we should vote is difficult. There are no obvious proof-texts to help us here—at least if we are coming with this particular question in mind. And yet, Scripture has quite a lot to say about politics, as we’ve seen throughout this book.

In contrast to the crowd-based logic of voting or protesting, let’s consider Jesus’s actions.

The kind of political action that characterizes Jesus’ kingdom is love and service. Jesus doesn’t consider “love” a kind of feeling one has of affection toward another, though it might involve that. Instead, Jesus illustrates what it means to love a neighbor by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Make no mistake, the Good Samaritan is a political story, for it involves a redefinition of a political constituency—the neighborhood—to include historical enemies of the Jews. And the action appropriate to one another is an active love that seeks the good of others before ourselves.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is all political speech, in a sense. He is outlining something of a political manifesto for his Kingdom of God. He lays out who is in his kingdom and who is not in the Beatitudes. Jesus has a startling conclusion that says we will know a tree by its fruits and that associating with the name of Jesus is not enough. He describes the governing principles of his kingdom—e.g. do not hate others, do not even imagine adultery, do not take oaths, do not resist evildoers, give to those who make unreasonable demands, love enemies, do good works in secret, do not judge, do not worry about provision, do not pursue revenge, settle disputes amicably and not with courts, forgive wrongdoing, etc. Jesus also lays out the principles of loyalty, “no one can serve two masters.” And Jesus lays out a mission or purpose of his kingdom—to be a light to the world.

The Sermon on the Mount is thus an outline of Christian political action. It is political because it involves neighbors and is thoroughly steeped in the language of the kingdom. These are not *ethical* principles Jesus outlines for individuals or secular governments, they are the demands of the kingdom of God, and there can be no two masters in this kingdom.

But, in contrast with voting and protesting, Jesus’ political actions all create individual responsibility and individual-oriented action that together transform a society. Love is never generic, it must be personal. The Good Samaritan didn’t meet a category to love, he met a single beat-up man and cared for him.

And in contrast with legitimizing the institutional powers, Jesus stated that his kingdom belongs to the humble, the poor, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for him. Voting, by contrast, empowers representatives to exercise power over one

another. It treats people as categories, and some of these categories of people (the homeless, those on welfare, undocumented immigrants) it treats as problems. And that all makes political sense. To run a large state or empire, one must reduce people to categories. Only... God is able to know, love, and care for each individual without reference to what category he or she falls into, and the kingdom of God does not advance through categorical motions, but through particular love and particular disciples. The kingdom of God is the place of infinite, loving nuance.

But Scripture also gives us freedom. We are free to participate in voting and protesting, but that freedom bears responsibility. Christian freedom is not freedom from other people and their demands upon us. Christian freedom is a freedom to take up responsibility in maturity for both ourselves and those around us. Voting and protesting come with an implicit framework—it is our duty and responsibility to understand these implications, and choose what is best for those beyond ourselves.

Reformed Theology

The question of voting with regard to Reformed Theology is a bit complicated. One can find the Reformed tradition present in various kinds of government, from the king-killing Long Parliament under Oliver Cromwell to the support of the monarchy among Scottish Presbyterians, to rebels against the crown of England among North American Presbyterians. Each group would have had different takes on how government should be conducted. And each of these groups linked their theological beliefs with their political causes in mutually contradictory ways. But we might note that the Reformed tradition has often been bold enough to not simply fall in line and legitimize governing structures. Our theological forebears had political boldness to be rebels and revolutionaries who did not keep their faith private. But we can also see that their passion for their political visions did not lead to eternally righteous institutions. All human politics fade away like the grass.¹

But Reformed theology might offer a few points to consider on the topic of voting, the most notable of which is our incredibly realistic understanding of human sin. Historically the doctrine of total depravity has often been used to describe the need for political institutions that can govern or manage the expressions of individual sin through judicial systems. But sin is not just individual lawbreaking—it can be enshrined in institutions and systems. Total depravity does not stop at the boundary of individual and institution, instead, institutions can be force-multipliers in the arsenal of Satan. It's not either individual sin or institutional sin, it's always a both-and.

So, it's worth distinguishing between institutions that aim at sin-management and those that aim at political utopianism. Those political institutions that aim to make the world a better place by reforming it in its own image are the most suspect of all. There can be no

¹ See Isaiah 40 and the chapter on it above.

righteousness apart from Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. There is no good for the world that isn't founded on his kingship over all of it. Either Jesus is Lord, or sin is, for everywhere Jesus is not Lord, there is rebellion against his claim to universal dominion.

Total depravity should also caution us against trust in the motives and promises of political candidates either to represent us faithfully, or to accomplish their proposed agendas. We should be wise as serpents in the political arena. We should not trust those who prove themselves unworthy in small things to somehow be worthy of great good in large matters.² Character matters, and our Reformed theological tradition is also totally clear on this—the Holy Spirit alone has the power of sanctification. Moral effort and good promises do not create the fruit of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Voting is a coalition strategy that simplifies individual voices to legitimize and empower certain candidates, or accomplish certain agendas through referenda. Voting legitimizes a system and validates the questions being asked.

But Scripture teaches us to be wary of political systems and those who demand our faith. We know that Jesus' kingdom doesn't look like the kingdoms of the world, and so we should not confuse any vote among human institutions with revealing the kingdom of God, or applying some kind of policy of the kingdom to a dominion where God is not king. This is not to say we cannot or should not vote, only that voting is not a neutral process, and that it can have a long-term caustic effect, eroding devotion to Jesus alone by the pressure of coalitions to abandon our strange and unique commitments to theological orthodoxy for the sake of political effectiveness.

Regardless of our position on voting, we should be primarily engaging the political world as Christians through the political tactics Jesus himself endorsed—love your neighbor and enemy. That is a personal, active pursuit of the good of others instead of ourselves. That likely involves creating contexts in which nuanced voices can be recognized, heard, and respected enough to disagree with on grounds acceptable to all parties involved.

In any and all cases, there is no biblical or theological grounds for separating the life of private devotion to God from public character, nor compromising on the essentials of faith for the sake of political success.

² Luke 16:10.

How to Evaluate our Consumption of Information

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith

It is essential that we recognize that we are all biased. Many American Christians imbibe information based on the logic of the Enlightenment. We believe ourselves to be neutral; we take in facts and believe we can achieve the right conclusion. We think of ourselves as unbiased. The reality is we are biased. Social media and the 24-hour news cycle help us to tailor our information intake. We need to step back and recognize our biases. We also need to distinguish news from opinion. For example, the evening news on *Fox News* or *MSNBC* is hard news with reporting that is vetted. *Hannity* and *Maddow* are opinion and clearly biased and they tailor their programming to fit their political views.

Because of this, we might need to refer to guides that show us the bias of news sources. We need to double-check our sources as well. If someone claims Jim Jordan or Barack Obama said an amazing quote on Facebook, Google key phrases to find the source. Use factcheck.org or snopes.com when someone posts a picture of a celebrity or politician claiming they said something. When we read a story online, check to see if the *Associated Press* has reported it. In the information age, we need to be on our guard.

We must recognize that many of our social and political beliefs are informed by our social interaction or the experiences we have within our context. For example, the majority reading this document are Presbyterian. That means we believe that children of believers should be baptized. But, to a Baptist, our practice is foreign, yet we think it is commonplace. At the same time, both Baptists and Presbyterians share some commonalities and differences.

Keeping with this idea, we recognize that there are degrees of differences, or plausibility of views that we might accept before we deem them unreasonable.¹ For example, we might say Roman Catholics are Christian, while Jehovah's Witnesses are not. It has to do with a range of accepted views that fall within a historical Christian framework like belief in the Trinity, or the person and work of Christ.

In a similar vein, we can see this in ideology. For example, in the U.S., a topic like universal healthcare is hotly debated. The majority of Evangelicals, according to the data, do not agree with a universal healthcare system. Yet, in other countries, like Scotland for example, very theologically conservative Christians embrace universal healthcare (AKA single-payer healthcare).²

What this example shows us is that sometimes our views are conditioned by our context. And what it means to be a good Christian, and citizen, is to operate in good faith

¹ Dae Ryeong Kim, "Understanding the Plausibility Structure of Modern Society,"
https://www.study21.org/mission/article/plausibility_structure.htm

² Some quotes supporting a single payer system can be found in this essay that is against it.
<https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-29-number-3/single-payer-healthcare-christian-view>

within our cultural framework and faithfully follow what is clear in the Scriptures and be good citizens as the New Testament admonishes us. When we stay in that place, we can avoid extremes.

What do we mean by extreme? Extreme can be defined as “black and white thinking” or taking an all or nothing approach with our ideologies or views.³ When we adopt this approach, we make everything a zero-sum game. Instead of political differences being about approaches to policy, they become “you hate America,” “you’re a socialist,” or pick any slur that fits.

This type of thinking is what creates polarization.⁴ It also weakens relationships. It causes us to categorize people and it leads us to devalue others more easily.⁵ When we operate within the framework of polarization, it causes us to see facts in that light. For example, research shows that people will simply ignore true facts if they do not fit political ideology.⁶

When people embrace information to fit their ideology, researchers say the way to combat is not to counter with true facts, or to disprove it, but find out why someone embraces that narrative—to listen and understand what motivates them to believe.⁷ With that beginning, humanizing the person instead of writing them off is the first step. It also affirms the biblical truth that every human is made in God’s image and worthy of dignity and respect.

How Do We Evaluate Conspiracy Theories?

Before addressing conspiracy theories specifically, it is worth discussing ways we can use critical thinking to tell the difference between truth and falsehoods more broadly. Daniel J. Levitin is very helpful here. His book, *Weaponized Lies*,⁸ explores what has happened in our society that makes it more difficult to tell truth from falsehood. He writes in his introduction:

I’m going to start by saying two things that will surely make some people very mad. First, the language we use has begun to obscure the relationship between facts and fantasy. Second, this is a dangerous by-product of a lack of education in our country that has now affected an entire generation of citizens. These two facts have made lies proliferate in our culture to an unprecedented degree. It has made possible the

³ Jennifer Litner, “Black and White Thinking: How it Can Limit You and How to Stop,” *Healthline*, 13 Jan 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/black-and-white-thinking>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kirsten Weir, “Why we believe alternative facts,” *American Psychological Association*, 48.5 May 27 2017. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/05/alternative-facts#>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Daniel J. Levitin, *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (New York: Penguin, 2017). See also Daniel J. Levitin, *A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking with Statistics and the Scientific Method* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

weaponizing of lies so that they can all the more sneakily undermine our ability to make good decisions for ourselves and for our fellow citizens.⁹

Levitin says, “there are not two sides to a story when one side is a lie.” And that is why critical thinking is essential: “critical thinking trains us to take a step back, to evaluate facts and form evidence-based conclusions.” It is normal for us to believe what others tell us, but we have to recognize they can be wrong. They can have their own opinions but not their own facts. Therefore, “the best defense against sly prevaricators, the most reliable one, is for every one of us to learn how to become critical thinkers.” And Levitin says the “most important component of the best critical thinking that is lacking in our society today is humility... Critical thinking trains us to take a step back, to evaluate facts and form evidence-based conclusions.”¹⁰ Critical thinking simply means to think in a structured way, and in that way it involves *logic*:

Formal logic reduces words and ideas to symbols that can be manipulated... we can also systematize our reasoning using informal logic that allows us to consider the meaning of words rather than reducing them to symbols fit into a structure... When those translated precise statements are built into a logical structure, you have an *argument*—the basic unit of reasoning... Structured arguments play a special role in highlighting the importance of *reasons for belief* (called a *warrant* in logical argumentation), which gives students the ability to understand why true premises can lead to a false conclusion—rather than labor under the misconception that the world consists of facts that can be true or false, with everything else falling into the category of opinion (or worse, ‘just an opinion’).¹¹

Critical thinking takes practice, and some more industrious people in the church would surely benefit from looking at some online educational resources.¹² In fact, entire textbooks on critical thinking can be found online for free.¹³ One can even find resources on media literacy that explain how media texts have purposes and target audiences, that all media are packaged

9 Quoted in <http://commonreads.com/2017/03/22/daniel-j-levitin-critical-thinking/>.

10 Quoted in <http://commonreads.com/2017/03/22/daniel-j-levitin-critical-thinking/>.

11 Jonathan Haber, “It’s Time To Get Serious About Teaching Critical Thinking,” *Inside Higher Ed* (March 2, 2020); <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/03/02/teaching-students-think-critically-opinion>.

12 See <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/austincc-learningframeworks/chapter/chapter-7-critical-thinking-and-evaluating-information/>. See also

<https://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/CriticalThinkingReviewFINAL.pdf>.

13 http://fdjpkc.fudan.edu.cn/_upload/article/10/90/88bc33024683a80cd4da88fc41f0/b44b90d4-3455-4eca-9e9c-31011233c3d1.pdf.

carefully, that media construct versions of reality, that media are interpreted individually, and that media are also about money and agendas.¹⁴

We have to recognize that conspiracy theories exist and that the Internet has made them far more pervasive. In their 2019 work, *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Nancy Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead argue that the Internet has created the conditions for conspiracies without the theory. In a recent interview with *The Economist*, they add that the Internet allows people to make assertions without evidence. Because of the rapid flow of information and the abundance of repetition, “senseless, destructive charges” gain authority because of the power of Facebook likes and shares and Twitter Retweets.¹⁵

Social media does not have gatekeepers. Americans have been less trusting of institutions (government, media) since the 1960s and there is a general cultural decline in civic participation. This, combined with rapid information and binary partisanship, has created the conditions to embrace false narratives. Rosenblum and Muirhead contend: “conspiracism creates a divide deeper than partisan polarization,” because facts are disregarded to the extent that truth is no longer true, it is the narrative.¹⁶

When ‘we’ lose politically, it is easier to embrace conspiracy theories. When Obama won in 2008, a conspiracy theory called ‘birtherism’ was posited without evidence. This theory claimed Obama was born in Kenya and thus ineligible to be President. When Trump won in 2016, the loss of political control led to the other side embracing conspiracies about coups when, for example, the Muslim Travel Ban was enacted in 2017.¹⁷ Conspiracies provide a sense of power and a mechanism to cope with its loss. This is not new. When Andrew Jackson lost the 1828 Presidential election, he and his supporters claimed a conspiracy by Henry Clay.¹⁸ There was no basis in any record, just assertion.

As Christians, we must be aware of what Mark Noll calls *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Because we do not cultivate ‘habits of the mind’—to be curious, seek out truth, and be willing to engage in self-criticism—we can be unprepared when faced with conspiracy theories. If we tend to view the Bible as a jigsaw puzzle and look for clues to interpret current events, we

¹⁴ Chris M. Worsnop, “Media Literacy Through Critical Thinking: Teacher Materials,” *NW Center for Excellence in Media Literacy*; https://depts.washington.edu/nwmedia/sections/nw_center/curriculum_docs/teach_combine.pdf.

¹⁵ “Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous – Here’s How to Crush Them,” *The Economist* (12 Aug 2019); <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/08/12/conspiracy-theories-are-dangerous-heres-how-to-crush-them>.

¹⁶ “Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous.”

¹⁷ Bryan Nyhan, “Why More Democrats are Now Embracing Conspiracy Theories,” *New York Times* (February 15 2017); <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/upshot/why-more-democrats-are-now-embracing-conspiracy-theories.html>.

¹⁸ “Conspiracy Theories Abounded in 19th Century American Politics,” *Smithsonian Magazine*; <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/conspiracy-theories-abounded-19th-century-american-politics-180971940/>.

have a tendency to take current events and look for a deeper meaning.¹⁹ In fact, historians have shown that religious groups that are more focused on 'end times' teachings have a tendency to interpret events in that fashion and a higher likelihood to embrace conspiracies.²⁰

To have a better grasp of conspiracy theories, we must be truth seekers. We have to recognize our own biases. We have to, as Marshall McLuhan argued in the 1960s and 1970s, realize that the information we take in is shaped by the medium from which it is consumed, and that information has the power to shape our brain chemistry.²¹ When we imbibe information that reinforces our pre-existing opinions or beliefs, that conditions us not to believe truth that might counter what we want to believe. It also makes us susceptible to embrace untruth because we want to believe it.

What should we do when we read a post or hear a story that seems like a powerful conspiracy is at work? For example, the furniture sales website Wayfair.com was accused of being a conduit to sell trafficked children in large pieces of furniture that had names one would give a person. This was shared millions of times on Facebook and Twitter as well as other social media without evidence other than the fact that Wayfair sold furniture with names like 'Neriah' or 'Yeritza' and there may have been an abduction of a child at some point with those names.²²

Here is what Michael Shermer offers in his article, "The Conspiracy Theory Detector," in an issue of *The Scientific American*.²³ He argues that we cannot dismiss all theories because conspiracies exist. Yet there is a paradigm we can use to evaluate the probability.

- When there is no real evidence to support the supposed pattern of 'connecting the dots', it is likely to be false.
- If it takes superhuman feats of intellect or power, it is likely false because people are not as powerful as they believe they are.

¹⁹ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 127–30.

²⁰ See Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Lahr shows how this played out during the 1950s and 1960s as Evangelicals and Fundamentalists attempted to make sense of the threat of potential nuclear war during the McCarthy era. Essentially, those who embraced dispensational premillennialism were more likely to believe conspiracy theories and read the news in light of 'connecting the dots' to find a secret or deeper meaning in the news. This happened during the late 1930s as well. Fundamentalist leader J. Frank Norris preached to crowds of over 15,000 and provided ways to interpret Hitler, Stalin, and FDR in light of the 'end times' but also make accusations that FDR and Stalin worked together to 'make America Red' through the New Deal.

²¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1964).

²² Daniel Funke, "How the Wayfair child sex-trafficking conspiracy theory went viral," *Politifact* (July 15, 2020); <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/jul/15/how-wayfair-child-sex-trafficking-conspiracy-theor/>.

²³ Michael Shermer, "The Conspiracy Theory Detector," *The Scientific American* (December 1, 2010); <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-conspiracy-theory-director/>.

- If a conspiracy involved a large number of elements to complete successfully, it is likely false.
- If a large number of people would all need to maintain silence. The more people involved with any conspiracy, the less likely silence can be maintained.
- If the conspiracy involves grand control of a nation, economy, or political system, and especially, world domination.
- If the conspiracy “ratchets up” from small events that might be true to very large, improbable events.
- If insignificant events are assigned sinister motivations.
- When fact and speculation are comingled without distinguishing between the two.
- When the theorist is someone who is innately suspicious of all government, media, or groups and does not possess the ability to engage in nuance.
- When the theorist refuses to consider alternatives, rejects evidence, or only accepts/finds evidence that reinforces their belief.²⁴

Shermer goes on to say that it is true that politicians lie. It is true that corporations will cheat. It is true that people plan bad things. However, the existence of those realities does not mean there is a conspiracy behind every event. Just because our brains like to connect dots does not mean the pattern is true.

Great care must be taken when transmitting information today. A viral tweet can reach tens of millions of people within a day. In fact, one account, TEN_GOP, which alleged to be the Tennessee Republican Party, gained over 136,000 followers.²⁵ One message would be re-tweeted thousands of times. Yet the information sent, often, was untrue or misleading. In fact, prominent politicians and pundits cited this account when it broke news or information. But it was fake. In fact, Russians operated this account; it was a troll farm meant to spread disinformation to disrupt our way of life.

Christians are inundated with rumors of stores banning the phrase ‘Merry Christmas’ or Google favoring another religion over Christianity. But we, who take in information at the fastest pace in human history, must be careful. We must be judicious. We must be engaged in the search for truth and not just information, especially information that reinforces biases in our partisan age.

²⁴ Shermer, “The Conspiracy Theory Detector.”

²⁵ Andrew Prokop, “23 tweets from @TEN_GOP, one Russian-run Twitter account mentioned in Mueller’s new indictment,” Vox (February 16, 2018); <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/19/16504510/ten-gop-twitter-russia>.

Does the Bible Endorse a Specific Political System?

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

There are many challenges to responsibly using the Bible as a source for modern political theory. But the Bible also offers some unique perspectives to challenge the kinds of questions and values that modern politics tends to take for granted. Answering this question satisfactorily would take a full book-length treatment, so this will be very summary.

The short answer is, of course, no, the Bible does not obviously endorse or support a political system. This is the case for a few important reasons.

Firstly, this is a question of interpretation and faithful reading of Scripture. Proof-texts could be found for almost any kind of political system, and historically there have been Christians who advocate for nearly all of them, from anarchists to monarchists, capitalists to communists, fascists to democrats, socialists to oligarchs, and nearly all have found some biblical support. This shows, if nothing else, that the Bible fails to deliver a universally obvious and compelling case for a political system. Looking at the context of various authors, it is often the case that they are looking to justify the political system of the nation they live in, especially during times of political upheaval, something we saw with our conversation about the Reformed tradition and changes to the Westminster Confession. A faithful reading of Scripture shifts the question of which political system is the most biblical to the more basic question, "What is the Bible saying about human claims to power and authority?" With this question in mind, the Bible opens up a dramatic and politically relevant story about God the king and his rebellious creatures, a narrative that stays highly consistent from Genesis through Revelation.

Secondly, it would be anachronistic to believe that the Bible could support a political system. For, what we often consider to be important in modern politics is indeed a kind of political technique or game in which everyone plays by specific rules. Ancient and medieval peoples did not tend to think systematically about governing theories in this way. Ancient and medieval politics tended to focus on the question, "Who has the right to rule?" Modern politics focuses on "How should society be run to achieve a goal?" The difference between these questions is large. While ancient Greeks and Romans did debate not just who should rule, but how, they were remarkable exceptions to an otherwise much larger picture of personal authority claims grounded in religion.

The Old Testament, unsurprisingly, shows us the political context of its varied authorship. The Pentateuch takes tribal patriarchy for granted. Judges shows how tribalism was not conducive to a unified vision and the peace of Israel. In the books of Samuel-Kings we see a critically cautious approach to a monarchy which was specifically designed to imitate other nations. Kingship also quickly fails to deliver on its promises of peace by centralizing wealth and leading to abuses of power that divided the kingdom in two, while also leading the whole nation to idolatry. The messianic hope of Israel during their exile was for a king in the line of David, but one who bucks the trends of corruption endemic in monarchy. Many texts of the OT are highly critical of human claims to power and authority, particularly Isaiah 40 and Psalm 2.

The New Testament was written far later and with some knowledge of the kind of political conversations happening in Greek and Roman culture. Paul certainly knew his political rights as a Roman citizen. While Jesus did not attack abuses of power like his cousin John the Baptist did (which led to his execution), Jesus still refused to acknowledge any authority over himself. But the New Testament resoundingly asks the same question, not “by what objective system should the world be governed? But “who has the right to rule?” The New Testament clearly states that God alone has the right to rule, that humans lord it over one another, that all the world is under the power of the evil one, and that Jesus represents the reign of God in himself. But when Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God, although he is giving a political manifesto, as it were, it is more of a description of the character of God’s personal rule, rather than an engineering blueprint for utopia like Plato or Karl Marx provided. Jesus doesn’t say “this is what the kingdom is and here are the steps we need to take to get there.” Rather, the hope of the New Testament is that God would himself replace the kingdoms of the world with a universal kingdom of God. Indeed, the notion of vicarious rule on behalf of God for humans is rejected by Jesus who does not commission his followers to dominion, but to the roles of ambassador and herald.

Thus, the biblical political “system” is the personal rule of God alone. The question that then has arisen is the nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus claimed that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. What did he do with that authority when he ascended into heaven? Two main options have been given:

- Jesus delegates his authority through human political power structures and systems... or
- Jesus’s claims to kingship exist within a delimited sphere of a divided reality, a “spiritual” kingdom only, and so his spiritual authority is delegated to the church and his civil authority is delegated through the state.

The latter is improbable, since it was precisely his claims to kingship that he did not contradict, got him killed. The logic that convinced Pilate to go ahead with the execution was that his claims were not merely religious Jewish debates, but a direct challenge to Caesar’s authority. “We have no king but Caesar”¹ shows that the crowds understood Jesus’ claims to be intersecting with Caesar’s, a point numerous NT scholars have reiterated in recent decades. Jesus was given ample opportunities to clarify his claims and explain that they were misunderstanding that his kingdom was merely some religious or spiritual concept that actually supported Caesar rather than challenging him. We also saw that civil and religious institutions have not always existed in humanity and so cannot be part of the “order of creation.” They are human social technologies not static divine orders.

The former idea that Jesus delegates universal power through the church does not cohere with the clear teachings of the NT. Jesus delegates his authority to his disciples to do the work of telling the gospel and baptizing people *within the nations*. We must remember that “gospel” was itself a term used by heralds in ancient Rome to announce major imperial

¹ John 19:12–18.

victories in war. Jesus commissioned his disciples to announce his kingdom, recruit followers into it, through baptism transform their allegiances to him, and bear the character of his reign to all people. Jesus' teaching to his disciples about the nature of how they treat one another, contrasted with the rulers of the gentiles, clearly shows that any delegated power or authority would have to be consistent with the character of Christ. After all, it is only when his followers are filled with the Holy Spirit that they begin to carry out their mission. It is the Holy Spirit working. Thus, power of God is not *delegated*, it is always only the presence of God.

These two options developed out of Medieval and Reformation theology in particular. For theologians like Augustine in *City of God*, the kingdom of God was single, and belonged only to those who lived in his city, who were wholly motivated by the love of God. The city of the world is the city of sin, of self-love. There is nothing compatible between the two, and they exist in an either/or relationship. While Christians may be strangers and exiles in the earthly city, their citizenship is in heaven. Augustine thus echoes Pauline language, and the book of Hebrews in a way that see discipleship as embracing every area of life, with a generally suspicious perspective on civil government claims to divine authority.

Medieval theology invented the notion of the "two swords" in which Jesus delegated his kingdom authority to the Pope, who then delegated this to civil authorities in a clear hierarchy. The civil authorities were answerable to the Pope, then. The church was above the state, but delegated material tasks to material powers. This didn't establish spheres of sovereignty, it was a single sovereignty—the church, who passed off its dirty work to civil leaders who were answerable to the church.

Reformation theology denied this medieval understanding, instead creating a two-kingdoms (Luther) or a twofold kingdom (Calvin) approach in which secular life was separated into a different sphere than the spiritual or sacred, just as a person is made of body and soul. Thus these two institutions had independent authority for their own realms, but both answerable to God. Unforeseeable to the Reformers, this kind of teaching laid the foundations of modern secularism in which materialists who deny the reality of the soul are left with the state claiming total dominion over all aspects of life.

So, we can see that whatever the modern system of civil government, they are all based in a Reformation-era principle that divides body and soul into separate spheres, eventually cordoning off the church from the state. So long as Christians maintain this principle, all of our political theology will be rooted in a baseline commitment to secularism, and we will be sucked into debates about the rightness of this or that form of governance in which the Bible can only be mustered for proof-texting. Ironically, we now see the inversion of the medieval situation in which power may be delegated to the church through the state.

Thus, rather than asking the Bible, "How should we organize our civic/secular systems?" the Bible ends up asking us, with Augustine, "Whom do you love with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength?" As with Augustine, the answer is an either/or. Either we love God and serve him alone, or we serve another. No one can serve two masters, nor can one mastery be divided into separate spheres. Nor can we divide the love of God from the love of our neighbor. We might be tempted to say that the love of God is spiritual and the love of

neighbor is political. But one cannot love a neighbor without the love of God, and so a political arena that excludes, ignores, or segregates God will be an arena devoid of love.

The biblical answer to the question of justice is not one of just distribution of material resources or opportunities, it is a question of love. Love of God is the source of justice in a properly biblical theology of justice. And so we cannot expect those who neither acknowledge God's existence, nor submit to his authority, would be capable of creating a just system. For that's exactly what just systems exist to do—to work of themselves, like political machines, with largely guaranteed and predictable results of common material prosperity for the people. Love, to the world of justice, is a hindrance to the exercise of *blind* justice. In the kingdom of God, justice is a high demand of love that requires personal maturity found only in sanctification through the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the Bible is not only not a source of answers to anachronistic questions of political theory, it turns the conversation on its head by questioning the very foundational assumptions we today make. If there can be a just political order without Jesus, we have misunderstood the gospel.

That is not to say that we cannot engage in political theorizing, or that those conversations should be avoided. Just the opposite! Becoming familiar with political theories is a way to reveal what gospel people believe in. Do they hold sacred the notion of personal liberty and opportunity? Do they believe that a kind of equality should be imposed on everyone? By not having to wed ourselves to this or that political camp, we can more easily see the contradictions and flaws that abound in each attempt to secure justice through rational political techniques. Jesus' idea of love is ultimately a different kind of question than political systems-thinking. It is the idea that we cannot use objective systems to cure human evils, nor secure human common goods, rather, it is only by the love of God that all creation flourishes together. Abundant life for all requires that humans not be in charge of managing the world.

Are all human political systems thus created equal? Of course not. They are each constituted based on different definitions of "the good" and different methods for attaining that good. That good can represent the good of a small minority and oppress the many, as many kings of old did. Or they may represent the good of a large majority and oppress the few, as the Chinese currently do with their systemic elimination of the Uighur people and identity. All institutions are tools that are engineered to accomplish a specific task. Wisdom is being able to discern that task and also what kind of people are being formed by the use of that institutional tool.

Whose Side is God on?

Rev. Michael Thornton

A common question that circulates through congregations every election cycle is “whose side is God on?” This question is well-intended; it is good and right for God’s people to look for him in order to follow him. Often, however, it is a healthy reminder to reflect on the quality of our King who is holy and righteous, two qualities that immediately prevent the triune God from fitting into any earthly political system fully. We can become distracted trying to figure out where God is, forgetting that there are other options for where God is. Could it be that God is less interested in siding with a political candidate than we think? Recall Joshua 5:13–15:

"When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you for us, or for our adversaries?' And he said, 'No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.' And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, 'What does my lord say to his servant?' And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, 'Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.' And Joshua did so."

Asking “whose side is God on?” is nothing new, but as we begin to pursue an answer to that question, we are rightly confronted by the *otherness* of the Christian God. This does not compel the believer to despair and give up trying. Instead, the believer, in community with other believers and in step with the Spirit, is invited to begin to examine what the Spirit might be doing, since we know that God is Immanuel, the God who is with us, entering into the fallen world to seek and save, to make all things new. So how do we know where God’s fingerprints might be within political systems?

Scripture does not paint God as holy in a totally abstract understanding. In fact, we know several clear indicators for where God might be moving because God discloses much of his character to his people. We know God is loving. We know that the fruit of the Spirit grows in the person of God. We know things “in the opposite” as well. In one direction, we know “God is love” and that:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.¹

By contrast anti-Kingdom fruit includes:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, NIV.

led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.²

We know what to look for in both the affirmative and in the negative. The Scripture just quoted continues, switching from the negative to the positive: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." We ought to look for kingdom fruit and the opportunity for kingdom fruit in our political activism. How might God be glorified through this party or candidate is a question worthy of raising, ideally in community, since iron sharpens iron.

Finally, since our primary call is to faithfulness and not winning, we should always help one another by guarding against any hint of pride-filled triumphalism. How many times do people choose sides based on the likelihood of winning versus based on the witness to the kingdom of God, regardless as to whether earthly success can be achieved through the action? We are not called to win elections, but we are called to witness faithfully to the Lamb and to the Lamb's kingdom. Ambassadors do not go to distant lands and attempt to take control; they go because they are sent and they maintain a posture of faithful representation. We are ambassadors from a distant land. America is not our home, though we hold a kind of citizenship and can work for its good, but we can never lose site of our first home, our true home, the eternal city of God.

Whose side is God on? "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come."

² Galatians 5:16–21, NIV.

Contributors

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