

The background of the cover is a photograph of a tattered American flag. The flag is positioned in the upper half of the frame, with its stars and stripes visible. It is set against a backdrop of a heavily distressed wooden surface, characterized by deep cracks, peeling paint, and a generally weathered appearance. The lighting is somewhat uneven, highlighting the textures of both the fabric and the wood.

# **Christians and Political Engagement**

**Dieumème E. Noelliste and  
M. Daniel Carroll R., editors**

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## INTRODUCTION

This volume represents the second installment in the Grounds Institute of Public Ethics Monograph Series. Readers of the series will recall that its inaugural publication was a reissue of Dr. Vernon Ground's very important paper on evangelicalism and social responsibility delivered over forty years ago at the Evangelicals in Social Action Peace Witness seminar held at Eastern Mennonite College, published by Herald Press in 1969. The continued timeliness of that groundbreaking piece, coupled with the fact the Institute has the good fortune of bearing the name of this modern day prophet, amply justifies the wisdom of the editorial decision to launch the series with that essay.

This publication, however, begins a new development in the series. This volume is a product of reflection generated by the Institute itself. The four chapters that form the present collection were presentations made at two of the Institute's main annual events. The first three chapters were papers given at the Salt and Light Seminar in the spring of 2009; the fourth was a message delivered at the Rally for the Common Good held in the winter of the same year.

Although we know that there are many ethical issues that deserve attention at any given time, the Institute has chosen to focus on a single theme each year. This approach has two advantages. First, it allows for deeper reflection and a more sustained exposure to a chosen theme. Second, it facilitates the treatment of the theme at several levels and from a variety of perspectives.

The essays published in the present volume reflect this the-

matic approach. For the first year of operation of the Institute, the decision was made to concentrate on issues pertaining to Christian faith and politics. The concern was to explore the way in which Christian faith might be able to prompt politics to greater conformity to God's will for life in community. In one way or another, this note is sounded throughout the book. While analyzing this theme from different angles, the contributors concur that if Christian faith is leveraged appropriately it can exert a positive influence on the political sphere. This influence, in turn, can rebound to the betterment of our common life and greater service to the common good.

Our exploration begins with Professor M. Daniel Carroll R.'s examination of a biblical view of human government and politics. In a survey of passages of the Old and New Testaments Carroll finds that, although the political order was established by God for the good of society, Scripture does not reveal an ideal model of human government; nor is it naïve about the capacity of human government to fulfill God's purposes for life in community. This is not meant to discourage Christians to work for better government. Rather, Carroll believes that the realism of the biblical perspective should inform how Christians participate in the political life of their societies and influence their expectations regarding the outcome of their involvement.

The exploration continues with historian Professor Scott Wenig's search for possible "lessons" that can be learned from the actions of Christians in the past. In his examination of the historical record, Wenig finds that, while our forbearers did participate in the political life of their societies, their approaches varied greatly. Their modes of engagement depended on the time, geographical location, and the circumstances of their contexts. In light of this, Wenig suggests that, instead of trying to imitate the past, Christians today might want to look for guides to help us shape responses that fit their circumstances.

Moving from the search for biblical precedents and historical antecedents, Professors Sung Wook Chung and Dieumème Noelliste proceed to suggest a theological anchorage for the task. The underpinning is located in four loci: (1) the ethical mandate given to the church by Jesus; (2) the role of the church as God's representative in the temporal domain; (3) the mode of life of the triune God; and (4) the presence of the eschatological kingdom in our midst. On this basis, the essay posits an ecclesial engagement in the political domain, which emulates, in community, the Trinity's mode of relating, and that is compelled by a passion for kingdom-driven transformation.

Dr. Gerald Gallimore's sermon delivered at the Institute's 2009 Rally for the Common Good provides a fitting conclusion to the book. Gallimore draws on the example of biblical figures, the actions of believers in the past, and theological principles in order to make the case for the credible and constructive involvement of God's people in the political sphere at all times, particularly in moments of crisis. For Gallimore, such participation is the Christian's response to the Lord's missional mandate to infiltrate society with the holistic, life changing, and context-transforming gospel that has been entrusted to his church for the wellbeing of the world.

*Dieumème E. Noelliste and M. Daniel Carroll R.*

# HUMAN GOVERNMENT: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

*M. Daniel Carroll R.*

## **Introduction: Thinking about Thinking about Politics**

Christians have been involved in the political life of the United States, to one degree or another, since the founding of the republic. Of course, Christians were involved in political matters during the colonial period as well. Christian interest in the public square is worldwide and has been a fact of the history of the church for two millennia.<sup>1</sup>

After two decades in the political arena, a number of conservative evangelicals in this country have expressed disenchantment about their involvement in the power games and lobbying that are part of the process. The sentiment is that many Christians on the Right succumbed too easily to the temptations of potential influence and prestige within a certain political party.<sup>2</sup> Other evangelicals, who are not committed (or are opposed) to that side of the ideological spectrum, have called believers to not be tied to any particular political agenda; Christians cannot be of the Right or the Left, they say, but must support what they feel better represents the values of Jesus and the Gospel. This search for an alternative political posture can be found at a popular level,<sup>3</sup> as well as in studies of more depth and nuance.<sup>4</sup>

The time is right to revisit the biblical material about human government. Too often discussions among Christians are debates



about political issues that are informed more by personal opinions and party loyalty than by a framework consciously drawn from Scripture. Some might cite a favorite passage or two, but there is a lack of a comprehensive biblical grounding concerning the nature of government and politics. The purpose of this chapter is to survey what the Old and New Testaments present about these matters. This is not a technical discussion;<sup>5</sup> nor is the goal to offer a full-fledged biblical theology of politics.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is hoped that this information can serve as a tool for more serious reflection on national and international politics.

### **The Origins of Government**

The appropriate place to begin a discussion on government in the Bible is with the creation of humanity in the first two chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1:26-28 says that every person, male and female, is made in the image of God. Systematic theologies propose several meanings as what it means to be made in the image of God. The Reformed tradition understands it in the sense of what people are and have: intellect, will, emotions, and a spiritual dimension. Lutheran theology takes the image in a relational sense, with Jesus Christ, who is the image of God, as the epitome of having communion with the Father and the One through whom this is restored (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15, 3:10).

The biblical text, however, emphasizes the functional aspect of the image: humanity is to have dominion over creation as God's representatives. This reveals that humans are unique; they have matchless value, potential, and a special responsibility. God is the supreme King; humans his vice-regents. He sets the standard for rulers. He orders creation in wise fashion (everything is "good"—in its place and according to its proper function) and within a moral framework (note the indications of right and wrong in

2:15-16).<sup>7</sup> From a biblical perspective, the ideal human ruler would exhibit these same qualities.

The Genesis narrative then relates the Fall of humanity. The chief temptation is to be like God (3:1-7)—to not serve under God, but to take his place. It becomes clear that, once humans try to take control, violence reigns (4:8-25; 6:11). The rebellion against God continues after the Flood at the Tower of Babel (11:1-9). Humanity has gathered to build an edifice that will reach to where God is, but he scatters them to counter the potential for evil. This confusion of language and the dispersal of peoples explain the origins of the nations that are listed in Genesis 10. The reader should grasp that the biblical narrative is communicating that all the nations in a sense have Babel as their mother; it is there that they find their ultimate origin. Hence, violence, arrogance, and rejection of God lie deep in the heart of all peoples and will characterize their politics.

Genesis 9 provides another important element of a biblically informed view of government. Although the first verse repeats the words of the opening chapter, it is readily apparent that human existence will now be characterized by bloodshed—echoing what had been said earlier. The spilling of human blood is now assumed (vv. 1-5), even though the ideal is to bring life (v. 7). Interestingly, violence is to be controlled by the threat of violence as punishment (v. 6). This truth could very well lie behind Paul's statement that the authorities yield the sword to castigate the evildoer (Rom. 13:2-4). These verses in Genesis 9 are essential to a theological perspective about the purpose of government: on the one hand, it is to restrain evil (especially the tendency toward violence); on the other, conversely, to promote the common good. These opening chapters of the Bible provide key points about governments and politics. First, they are proud and are inclined to turn from God. Governments socialize their people to hold their nationalism dear. Every country in the world will inculcate strong

feelings of patriotism through its national anthem, flag, parades, holidays, and stories of its idealized founders. At their best, these can inspire people to achieve great things. At their worst, they propel nations in their ambition and conceit to impose themselves on others they deem inferior through economic, cultural, or military means. The second point is related to the first. All nations dedicate themselves to some degree to violence. They invest huge amounts of money in armament and training its forces how to kill—again, not always for the best causes. Some even resort to violence against their own people to maintain power.

All of this should give Christians pause and encourage them to develop a solid biblical realism about government and politics. They must be wary of blind nationalism or naïve allegiances, of any call to put country first above all else. Lutheran ethicists characterize (properly, I believe) human government as an “emergency order” or an “order of preservation.” That is, government is a provision of God after the Fall, until the Coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness; it is to protect humanity from self-destruction, even though it can be very sinful and destructive.<sup>8</sup>

### A Different Perspective on Government and Politics

If government is a necessity, is provided by God, and yet is sinful, then it is important to know what God expects of those who rule and how his people should view their own governments and politicians. Both the Old and New Testaments speak to these issues. This section will survey several key passages, which present the divine ideals of government or that serve as warnings about what can be expected of human government in a fallen world.

#### 1. *Deuteronomy 17:14-20.*

This passage is set at the Jordan River, where Israel receives once

again the law from God (“Deuteronomy” means the “second law”). They are ready to cross into the Promised Land, where they will establish a new society. One way of looking at the Law is to appreciate its role in the creation of an alternative culture. Israel had left Egypt, whose culture had its own norms about socio-economic classes and their relationships, the treatment of the vulnerable, the role of religion in daily personal and national life, the nature of its government, and the status of its leader (Pharaoh). What the LORD provides his people in the Law is a blueprint for a different kind of social reality. The same human concerns were to be dealt with, but the make-up of things and how they would function was to be unique. In fact, their new society would be an example to other nations and a testimony to their God (Deut. 4:5-8). Part of what was to be distinct was Israel’s government.

In the ancient world, a ruler’s greatness was measured by at least three things: the size of the armies (power), the amount of precious goods of the royal court (wealth), and the number of women in the harem (the virility of the king). These verses present an “anti-ideology,” as it were: Israel’s kings were not to accumulate any of these items (vv. 16-17)! The king must be an Israelite (v. 15), so that he would understand this way of looking at governance. He also must have a copy of the Law and continuously read it to know God’s will and so that he “not consider himself better than his brothers” (vv. 18-20). Humility and solidarity with the people, not aloofness and a lifestyle at the expense of others, were to characterize Israel’s rulers. In other words, God expected a standard of living, goals, and attitude from those who would govern his people that would be a stark contrast to the usual way of doing politics.

#### 1 Samuel 8.

1 Samuel 8 the people ask for a king. Sovereigns at that time were expected to fulfill at least two tasks: establish justice in their lands

and lead their people into war. These are the very two things that Israel was looking for. Samuel's sons were corrupt and incapable of providing justice, and the constant threat of the Philistines made them want someone to be their champion (vv. 2-3, 19-20). At one level, this demand represented a turning away from God and a lack of faith in divine provision and protection (vv. 6-9). At the same time, what Samuel tells the people is a window into what can drive politics (vv. 10-18). The verb that occurs repeatedly in the passage is "take." Governments will "take" their sons and daughters to serve in the armed forces and palace (vv. 11-13), their goods and produce to give to others as political favors (vv. 14-15), their assets for its own projects (v. 16), and a percentage as tax (v. 17). Here it is clear that governments can be very self-promoting, benefiting from those under their care for their own gain.

Then as now, the desire for justice and security is a natural impulse. Those who lead can take advantage of that to maintain themselves in power and to live well at others' expense. Again, the biblical text provides a realistic perspective on politics. The very sinfulness of human government is the reason that the Old Testament repeatedly underscores that God will judge them for the things that they have done to their own citizens and to other peoples.

There is another lesson to be learned from this passage. 1 Samuel 8 is the first concrete step taken to establish the monarchy. Up until that time, Israel had functioned as a nomad people made up primarily of shepherders or peasant farmers. Once in the land, they lived primarily in villages made up in large measure of extended families within their tribal lands; in time, a series of regional judges arose to lead them (Deuteronomy – 1 Samuel). The monarchy at first was quite unsophisticated. Saul had no real capital, governmental structures or trained standing army. With David and his son Solomon, Israel came to have a capital city, Jerusalem; a bureaucracy was organized, cities built, and the armed forces formalized (2 Sam. 5-8; 1 Kgs. 4, 10). Later, for a time the Northern and South-

ern Kingdoms were vassal states to the Assyrian empire (and Judah for several years to Babylonia), had to pay annual tribute, and obey the imperial sovereign. When Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 and Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BC, these regions became provinces of the empires. Those who returned from the Exile under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah with the approval and aid of the Persians were able only to set up a quasi-independent state that had a good deal of local freedom but which still had to pay taxes and confess loyalty to the Persian king. In other words, there is no one model for government in the Old Testament. The people of God experienced a variety of forms of rule over the centuries. There is no design in the pages of the Old Testament in terms of how to organize government, although the ethical principles and expectations are clearly set forth.

#### *Messiah in Isaiah.*

The book of Isaiah also deals with the *Realpolitik* of government. The prophet is critical of Ahaz, king of Judah, for his lack of faith before the threat of Israel and Syria/Aram (chs. 7-8; 734 BC), as he is years later of Hezekiah and his advisors, who look to Egypt for help against Assyria instead of trusting in the mighty hand of God (chs. 30-31; 701 BC). He also mocks the arrogance and cruelty of the rulers of Assyria (ch. 10) and Babylon (chs. 13-14, 47). Even the smaller nations are haughty (16:6)! Isaiah is well aware of the world of palace intrigue and war.

The prophet also looks beyond his context to another king and another time, beyond the sinful sovereigns and nations of his day: to Messiah and his kingdom. This ruler will be a powerful and wise king in the line of David (9:6-7), empowered by the Spirit to rule justly (11:1-5); his will be a kingdom of peace with Zion as its center (2:1-5; 11:6-10). In the second half of the book the One who is to come is described as the Servant of the LORD (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). He exhibits royal prerogatives,

such as establishing justice (42:1-4), which connects his person to the king figure of earlier chapters. Unlike the servant that is Israel, who is rebellious and blind (41:8-10; 42:18-22; 43:8-13; 44:1, 21-23), this Servant-King is obedient to God and through his self-sacrifice brings healing to Israel and the nations. His reign will be a messianic jubilee: Israel will be restored, and with the world, will enjoy the Servant's government (chs. 61-62, 65).<sup>9</sup>

The rather negative picture of politics that is found elsewhere in the Old Testament is also evident in the book of Isaiah in its descriptions of what the prophet witnessed in Judah and among the nations. The additional piece that is important for a full biblical perspective on government is the prediction of a future perfect ruler and his kingdom of peace, justice, abundance, and the proper worship of God. This hope should temper all automatic or absolute support of any ruler or government. One day, God will rule through his Servant-King. No human leader should be mistaken for being perfect, nor should people place unquestioning trust and hope in any person or government program to usher in that age of tranquility and prosperity for which all humanity yearns.

#### *Jesus, the Messianic Kingdom, and New Testament Teaching.*

The Gospels announce that the Messianic Kingdom was inaugurated at Jesus' first coming. At Nazareth he proclaims that the hope of the messianic jubilee of Isaiah 61 had been fulfilled (Lk. 4:16-21). Later, in response to the query from John the Baptist's disciples, he alludes to messianic passages to characterize his ministry (Lk. 7:18-23; cf. Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1-2). Jesus says that he had come from the heavenly realms and had unbelievable power at his disposal (Matt. 26:52-54; Jn. 18:36; 19:11) and that one day he would return from his throne at the right hand of God (Matt. 26:64-65 and parr.; cf. Rev. 19:11-18). The religious leaders understand the implications of what Jesus is claiming, that he is as-

setting equality with God. They hate Jesus for what they consider to be his blasphemy (Matt. 26:65-68 and parr.), but their accusation before Pilate is that Jesus had usurped the kingship of Caesar (Jn. 19:12-16). Ironically, this Messiah, whom the masses had welcomed at his arrival into Jerusalem as the Son of David (Matt. 21:1-11 and parr.), is mocked and then crucified as "king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:27-40 and parr.; Jn. 19:19-22). His death is both a spiritual and a political act.

At his resurrection Jesus was declared to be both Lord and Christ (Matt. 28:18; Acts 2:29-36) and was exalted to the right hand of the Father, from whence he rules and will return in glory (1 Cor. 15:23-25; Eph. 1:18-23; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1; Rev. 5, 19). As the resurrected Lord (*christos*), he is above all human rulers. At the time that Paul wrote, this high and unmatched status would have included Caesar, head of the Roman Empire, who was believed by many to be divine and worthy of all deference and even worship. Christians have another king and are citizens of another kingdom (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 13:14; cf. Col. 1:13); they are but strangers in a strange land (1 Pet. 2:9-11). Consequently, although they are to respect the earthly authorities under whose jurisdiction they live and which God puts in place ideally to institute order and the care of its citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17), Christians must recognize that their ultimate allegiance lies elsewhere (cf. Acts 4:18-20). They are to exhibit a unique ethic and live a life worthy of their calling and in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 12; Eph. 4-6; Col. 3).

Echoing the stance of the Old Testament, the New does not idealize human government. The Gospels relate how both John the Baptist and Jesus are executed for political and social expediency; the book of Acts records the variety of responses that human authorities have to the original disciples and later to Paul and how they respond to pressure from constituents. It is to be expected that Christians will be persecuted and suffer for their

faith and character (e.g., Heb. 10:19-12:13; 1 Pet. 2:18-25; 3:8-4:19; Rev. 6:9-11). Utilizing imagery from Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, the book of Revelation describes the world empire as Babylon, a beast, and the leader of Gog and Magog. And, again as do the prophets of the Old Testament, it calls for the coming of Messiah (Rev. 22:20). The fuller picture revealed in the New Testament is that the Messianic Kingdom was inaugurated at the first coming, but Christians are to await the final judgment of the kings and nations of the earth (Rev. 18-19) and the establishment of Jesus' kingdom in its fullness at the Second Coming (Acts 3:17-21; 1 Cor. 15:23-25; Rev. 20:6) and beyond that a more glorious New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21-22).

In summary, this quick look at some important passages in both Testaments point to several fundamental components of a biblical view of human government and politics: Human governments are designed by God to protect life and promote the good, but it must never be forgotten that in this fallen world they will exhibit arrogance and sinfulness. There is no one model for human government that is revealed in the Bible as the best. What is found in the Scripture are the various political arrangements with which the people of God lived across millennia. Instead, it presents God's demands on rulers and their regimes.

God's ideals for leaders and government often are very different from historical realities. Christians look forward to the time when the Messiah will come, judge the nations, and establish his kingdom. He alone can fulfill what God desires in a ruler, and only his kingdom will provide appropriately all that humanity needs and desires.

The sinfulness of government and rulers, the hope of this other king and realm, the citizenship in that kingdom, and the experiences of persecution all underscore that Christian loyalty to country and leaders cannot be unconditional or total. Participa-

tion must always be undertaken with utmost realism and wise caution. Christians can work for a better politics, but always with limited expectations and in accordance with biblical guidelines.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

This short essay has attempted to briefly summarize the rich teaching of the Bible on human government and politics. The Scripture is extremely realistic in its presentation, and this perspective should guide Christian allegiances, attitudes, and behavior in politics. The people of God are called to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3) and salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). How this mandate will be manifest in the political arena in wisdom and holiness, even as this engagement is tempered by a citizenship not of this world and by the hope of another king, will vary by context. It will require strong character and an unwavering set of informed convictions. Theological traditions have understood this involvement differently, and Christians have participated in government in any number of ways. Our hope is that this survey of biblical teaching will contribute to keener reflection and constructive actions for the good of the Church and the glory of God.

<sup>1</sup> Note the survey of contemporary involvement around the world by Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Cannot Save America* (sec. edn; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York, NY: HarperSan Francisco, 2006); idem, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008); Lisa Sharon Harper, *Evangelical 'Republican'... or Democrat* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics: Why Are Christians Missing the Chance to*

*Really Change the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); David Gushee, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> A good example of such a work is J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power—An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis-Kings* (LHB/OTS 454; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006). Less technical but helpful are, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 212-80.

<sup>6</sup> This chapter will not engage the classic theological formulations of the Reformed, Lutheran, Anabaptist, and Roman Catholic traditions, nor contemporary political theologies, whether older formulations like that of Johannes B. Metz or the recent work of others like Oliver O'Donovan.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, pp. 106-29.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (transl. R. Krauss, C.C. West, and D. W. Scott; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 4, 19-20, 131, 173; Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1: *Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 359-451.

<sup>9</sup> Cyrus is called "messiah" in 45:1. He was anointed (i.e., chosen and empowered) to facilitate the return of the people of God to the land at a particular moment in history. He is not the person described in these other passages.

## THE LESSONS OF HISTORY ON FAITH AND POLITICS

Scott A. Wenig

### Introduction

In my final year of undergraduate studies I came across a small but profound book entitled *The Lessons of History* by Will and Ariel Durant.<sup>1</sup> First published in 1968, it was the fruit of almost five decades of historical scholarship during which time the Durants wrote an eleven volume series entitled *The Story of Civilization*. Given the time, energy and effort which the Durants put into their work, it would only seem natural that they could, with some discernment, write a book about the lessons of history. While I've read a lot of history over the past forty years and took an advanced degree in the discipline, I'm not sure I'm nearly as qualified to speak on the lessons of history as they relate to the Christian faith and political action. Nonetheless, that's the topic which my esteemed colleague, Dr. Dieumène Noelliste, has assigned me so I will do my best. In doing so, I've chosen to look at three very different eras of the church's history in effort to see what we might distill from the ambiguous and tenuous relationship between the Christian faith and politics. My goal is to show two things: first, that the historical-cultural context in which believers find themselves profoundly conditions how they view political action. There is, as one noted scholar has observed a universal tendency for people to adjust their ideas to circum-

stances rather than adjusting circumstances to their ideas.<sup>2</sup> The second is a corollary to the first: there is no one right method for how Christians should engagement with politics; rather different times, places and situations allow for and, may even call for, the application of different political strategies.

### **Early Christianity: Submission, Sacrifice and Supplication**

I'd like to begin our study with the era of the early church, specifically from the time of Jesus and the apostles in the first century A.D. up to the Constantinian Revolution of 312. For roughly the first three hundred years of its existence, the Church had no political power and a conflicted relationship with the Roman Empire. In view of this reality, I would suggest that the early church's political approach could be described with three words: submit, sacrifice and supplicate. We see all three of these played out from the time of the apostles up to the end of the third century.

In the New Testament there is clearly a tension between the church and the government. In Romans 13 Paul makes a strong case for submission to the governing authorities and roots his command in the sovereign work of God. In his view, God created government; therefore Christians need to submit to it. Moreover, in I Timothy 2 he strongly argues that when the church gathers together for worship, one of its first duties should be to pray for the governing authorities. Here his reasoning is more missional. He commands the church to pray for kings and all those in authority so that the church may live in peace and quiet and then he goes on to state that 'This is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all men to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.' Paul recognized that a stable society, rooted in the good governance of a wise ruler, was a positive factor in the Church's evangelistic endeavors.

Peter argues in a similar vein. In I Peter 2:13 and following, he commands the believers throughout Asia Minor to submit to the governing authorities, showing proper respect and honor to all those authorized by God to rule. Once again, some of the motive behind this command is missional. Christians are to submit in order to demonstrate the goodness of their lives. Consequently, they may gain a hearing from the authorities and society at large for the message of the Gospel.

Conversely, there is an adversarial perception of government in the New Testament. While Jesus commanded his followers to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, in Revelation 13 the apostle John metaphorically described the Roman government as a ten-horned, seven-headed blasphemous beast arising out of the sea. This beast was given authority to rule and then demanded worship from the people of the earth. In this strenuous context, John called for the saints to faithfully and patiently endure the tribulation which the government brought upon them.

As the Empire began to take a more negative approach towards the church, particularly in the second century, there arose what I call an attitude of 'defiant sacrifice.' We see this most clearly in the testimonies of many of the early Christian martyrs. Ignatius, bishop of the great church in Syrian Antioch, was hauled off to Rome in the early years of the second century to face death at the hands of the imperial authorities. He wrote to his fellow believers at Rome:

I am writing to all the Churches and state emphatically to all that I die willingly for God, provided that you do not interfere. I beg you, do not show me unseasonable kindness. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, which are the means of making my way to God. God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ's pure bread.<sup>3</sup>

This same sense of a defiant willingness to sacrifice one's life for Christ at the hands of the Roman authorities is seen time and again. Aged Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in the mid-second century exemplified this. He was arrested and brought before the proconsul who exhorted him to deny Christ and live. In a now famous statement he made this wonderful reply: "Eighty and six years have I served Him and He did me no wrong. How shall I blaspheme my King who saved me?" When further persuasive attempts by the authorities proved useless, he was taken to the stake where he was stabbed to death and his body burned.<sup>4</sup>

And while innumerable stories could be told of the early Christian martyrs perhaps the most touching is that of a young Egyptian noblewoman named Perpetua. Despite being the daughter of a Roman official she was imprisoned not long after giving birth and subjected to taunts and insults by the guards. But Perpetua willingly used her political connections to secure better food and more humane treatment for those imprisoned for the name of Christ. When finally condemned by the courts, her infant son was taken from her and she and her Christian servant, Felicitas, were brought to the arena at Carthage. There they were gored by wild beasts but retained enough strength to publicly give each other the kiss of peace before their throats were cut by two trainee gladiators. Apparently, many in the crowd were touched by their testimony and some even gave their lives to Christ.<sup>5</sup> As Tertullian, the great North African spokesman for the faith, once noted, 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.'<sup>6</sup>

In addition to a willingness on the part of some Christians to defy the state to the point of death, others turned to what might be labeled 'political supplication.' In an effort to gain a more sympathetic view of the faith, various spokesmen wrote apologetic tracts for public consumption. Some of these were open letters to the Emperor which were certainly read by the public, even if they never to the eyes of the man to whom they were addressed. Oth-

ers were appeals to the public at large, such as *The Address to the Greeks*, written by Irenaeus, bishop of Gaul in the latter half of the second century. Still others were addressed to government officials of a lower rank than those at the Imperial court.<sup>7</sup> While these tracts differed in their respective audiences, their logic was often quite similar. They often argued along the following lines: Christians are not the enemies of the state but its best citizens; Christians are not guilty of any of the crimes of which they're accused but simply victims of the Jewish prejudice or jealous pagans or both; Christians seek the good of Rome and pray regularly for the Emperor. While each of these writers was willing to admit that believers were different, who in their right mind could object to their lifestyle? As the so called Letter to Diognetes put it most eloquently:

[Christians] obey the established laws and in their own lives they try to surpass the laws. They love all men and are persecuted by all... They are poor and make many rich. They lack everything, and in everything they abound. They are humiliated and their humiliation becomes their glory. They are abused – and they bless. They are reviled and are justified. They are insulted and they repay insults with honor.<sup>8</sup>

Was the strategy of 'submit, sacrifice, and supplicate' politically effective? To some degree I think the answer is 'yes', at least for that particular context. It almost certainly facilitated the numerical growth of the church and may, at times, have gained sympathy from imperial officials. What we do know for certain is that by the early part of the fourth century, Christians probably composed at least ten percent of the population and perhaps more. What Constantine recognized was that when the Empire persecuted the church, it was only hurting itself. Thus, he chose to le-



gitimize the faith in an attempt to reinvigorate an Empire that had been torn asunder by famine, political intrigue and social disorder.<sup>9</sup> In doing so he laid the political foundation for what, over the next five hundred years, would become the *corpus christianum*, the total Christian society of the Middle Ages.

### Corpus Christianum: Knowledge, Power and Coercion

This foundation was catalyzed by the political theory of Augustine, perhaps the greatest thinker in the history of the Faith, and it became political reality in the late eighth century under Charlemagne. From roughly 800 A.D. to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the concept of the *corpus christianum* would dominate Western Europe. And while church and state would battle each other for dominance over this long era, the vast majority of people believed that it was God's will for them to be united. But as events unfolded, especially in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, this marriage of Christian faith and political power created some challenging conundrums and horrible dilemmas. One of the most prominent of these was the English Civil War.

Rooted in the English Reformation of the sixteenth century, the English Civil War has sometimes been labeled the last of the Wars of Religion. These were the conflicts fought on and off from the 1530s through the 1650s between various Protestant groups and Roman Catholics. Both sides fully embraced the ideal of the total Christian society which still seemed attainable and enormous numbers of people were prepared to wage war, massacre, hang, burn and pillage to realize it.<sup>10</sup> What is so surprising about the English Civil War is that it was fought by two different Protestant groups, each claiming Christ as king, and their particular vision for England and English government as His own. As we examine it in some detail we see what can happen when highly

committed Christians use political power to try to create a society, which they sincerely believe will glorify God. We might describe this political strategy in formulaic terms: knowledge plus power equals coercion.

A root cause of the English Civil War was the differing theoretical perceptions of the monarchy. James I, king of England from 1603 to 1625, was utterly committed to the concept of the divine right of kings over all laws and assemblies, accountable only to Almighty God. In addition to his royal responsibilities, James was also a formidable scholar and in 1598 published his views in an essay entitled *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. Opposing the church polity of Presbyterianism, which had taken over his native Scotland, James strongly advocated an Episcopal form of church government to support a divinely ordained monarchy. It was a conception of the now centuries old church-state alliance which gave rise to his famous motto, "No bishop, no king." Moreover, the words 'dialogue', 'compromise', or 'negotiate' were not in James' vocabulary. He saw the Anglicanism of the Church of England as the best religious support for royal authority and tenaciously promoted it throughout his reign.<sup>11</sup>

Within months of his coronation, the king was confronted by a growing movement of Protestant ministers and laity known as Puritans. Puritanism originated in the late 1570s during the reign of Elizabeth I and became politicized a decade later. But the Queen crushed its political ambitions and drove the more militant Puritan activists underground until her death in 1603. When James came to the throne of England later that year, the Puritans were optimistic about ecclesiastical change due to his theological bent towards Calvinist orthodoxy. Early on over a thousand Puritans presented their new monarch with The Millenary Petition in which they asked him to amend what they perceived as offensive rites and ceremonies in the Church of England. Among these was the elimination of the cross in baptism, the cap and surplice for

clergy in worship, and the ring in marriage. They also argued that preaching and residency be required of all parish clergy, that clerical marriage be allowed and that excommunication for trifling offenses be eliminated. Furthermore, they wanted the Prayer Book edited in order to eliminate what they perceived as popish offenses and both the Thirty-Nine Articles and the authorized catechism from the 1560s revised. And, in the most controversial of their proposals, they sought a gradual elimination of Episcopal polity. James granted nothing to the Puritans and especially refused to yield on episcopacy, believing that it bulwarked his own divine right supremacy.<sup>12</sup>

This marked the beginning of an ongoing decades-long feud between the crown and the Puritans, which catalyzed the Puritan emigration to Holland and then North America and eventually resulted in the English Civil War. James died in 1625 and was succeeded by his even more truculent and absolutist son, Charles I. By this time Parliament was dominated by Puritans, and they quarreled with the new king from day one. Frustrated by Parliament's stubborn refusal to submit to his royal authority, Charles dismissed it in 1629 and ruled alone for the next eleven years.

While the ongoing conflict between the crown and Parliament was due to a complex combination of political, financial and religious factors, religion was the most dominant and explosive. In 1628 Charles appointed William Laud bishop of London and then in 1633 elevated him to Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud was a staunch Anglican conformist who hated the Puritans and was totally committed to a stern religious uniformity. He used the royal law courts to try and convict anyone who refused to abide by Anglican doctrine, liturgy and polity. Moreover, in 1637 Laud made an example of three Puritan pamphleteers by cropping their ears for religious opposition but they quickly became national heroes. The next year he tried to enforce the Anglican Prayer Book on the Presbyterian populace of Scotland causing

the Scots to revolt and invade northern England in 1640. This placed king Charles in a quandary. Faced with an inadequate army, no money and almost no popular support, he was forced to recall Parliament.

This Parliament, eventually labeled the Long Parliament and dominated by Puritans, sat from 1640 to 1653 and became the center of religious and political revolt against the crown. By means of a series of constitutional acts, it declared many of the king's taxes as illegal, abrogated the monarchy's ability to dismiss Parliament without its consent, and abolished Laud's royal law courts. Fearing a complete loss of power, Charles literally invaded the House of Commons with a battalion of soldiers seeking to arrest its more radical leaders. But this military coup failed and almost overnight, anti-monarchical mob action forced the king to flee London. Within months, England was in the throes of Civil War between the forces of the crown known as Cavaliers and those of the Puritan-dominated Parliament, known as Roundheads.

At this point, the spectacular rise of an obscure Member of Parliament named Oliver Cromwell literally changed history. Cromwell was a military genius who created a regiment of godly men known as the New Model Army. They sang hymns as they went into battle, held vigilant prayer meetings, and became a tightly disciplined fighting force that never lost a battle. Their military dominance over the Cavaliers allowed Parliament to rule England, resulting in the overthrow of Anglicanism, the dissolution of the English monarchy and the eventual dominance of Presbyterianism. At a more personal level, Archbishop Laud was executed in 1645, Charles was captured in 1646 and on January 30, 1649, the king was publicly decapitated as a traitor to both God and country.<sup>13</sup>

From the religious perspective, Presbyterians ran the Long Parliament and from 1643 to 1648 produced the *Directory of Worship* (1643), the Short Catechism of 1647, and the *Westmin-*

*ster Confession of Faith* (1648) – all three landmarks of Presbyterian theology and polity. But their dominance quickly came to be resented, not only by Anglicans but also by a wide variety of Protestant sects such as the Diggers, Ranters, Levellers, Quakers and Fifth Monarch Men. Moreover, at a functional level, real political power lay in Cromwell's hands because he controlled the army. Believing himself to have been chosen by God, Cromwell rejected both radical Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism in favor of being an 'Independent' Calvinist. In 1648 he took a genuinely revolutionary religious stand when he issued a remonstrance against forcing religion into any one mold, so long as it was Protestant. The following year he granted liberty in religion to all but devotees of 'popery and prelacy,' a concept previously unheard of in the context of the *corpus christianum*.<sup>14</sup>

Following the death of Charles, tensions grew between Cromwell and Parliament. Finally, in 1653 he dismissed it as corrupt and inefficient and appointed himself Lord Protector of England with a standing army of 50,000 men. He ruled as an absolute dictator but would not take the title of king. Moreover, his own style of Calvinistic Puritanism soon dominated the<sup>15</sup> religious landscape of England in the form of desecrating ornate church altars, prohibiting Christmas and other public festivals, relegating marriage to a civil rite, and prohibiting dancing and other forms of what he deemed to be 'licentious behavior.'<sup>16</sup> When he died in 1658 the political and religious forces of a restored Anglican monarchy came back to England in the person of king Charles II.

The Restoration was a violent reaction against Cromwell and the rule of the 'saints.' To punctuate how many felt about the Lord Protector, his body was disinterred from Westminster Abbey and publicly hung in the town of Tyburn. Moreover, a series of Parliamentary acts called the Clarendon Codes were passed from 1660 to 1670 specifically designed to punish the Puritans. Eng-

land, and her church, would never again take on the ethos of militant Protestantism. The political strategy employed by the Presbyterians and then Cromwell and his followers of using knowledge and power to coerce religious conformity backfired on them all in a profound way. The Augustinian vision of the *corpus christianum*, conceived so clearly over 1200 years before, was now essentially at an end for both Protestants and Catholics throughout Europe.

Across the Atlantic in what was known as North America, those Puritans who had emigrated from England were embarked on a bold new experiment. Their goal was to create a genuinely Christian civilization of the truly regenerate. And for approximately three generations – from 1620 to 1690 – many of them gave their best efforts and even their lives to bring that about. But the Puritan experiment was doomed to fail, for at least two reasons. First, America was a vast country with no political or national boundaries; if you didn't like where you lived or the people or religion that you lived with, you could always pick up and leave. In other words, a theocracy was simply not geographically tenable. Second, the depravity of the human heart, a genuinely Puritan doctrine if there ever was one, kept revealing itself in the religious apathy and worldly concerns of the second and third generations of American Puritans. As Cotton Mather, spokesman for the last of the elect, concluded in his 1702 treatise *Magnalia Christi Americana* (the great deeds of Christ in America): "Religion brought forth prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother... There is danger lest the enchantments of this world make them forget their errand into the wilderness."<sup>17</sup>

Spiritually, North American Protestantism was revived by the First Great Awakening that lasted from 1536 to the early 1540s. Facilitated by the preaching of George Whitefield, thousands gave their lives to Christ, churches were renewed and the faith spread through all thirteen colonies as well as to the frontier. Thus, reli-

gion in the form of Protestant revivalism was the first pervasive American force, which transcended colonial differences and helped to shape political unity. In fact, it can be persuasively argued that the American Revolution was a result of the combination of revivalism and the Enlightenment rationalism of a narrow elite exemplified by Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and George Washington.<sup>18</sup>

Following the Revolution, these same men framed a government based on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. One of the key elements of the Bill of Rights was that there would be no established church. That did not mean, however, that America was secular or irreligious. On the contrary, the republic was based on the necessary reality of a Judeo-Christian worldview rooted in the Bible and the Decalogue and manifesting itself throughout the growing nation in countless forms of Christian worship. No one articulated this social reality better than Alexis de Tocqueville in his class work, *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. Coming from France, the primary thing that struck him about the United States was the vast quantity of churches and the overwhelming positive attitude towards Christianity throughout the country. As he noted:

In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other: but in America I found that they were intimately united, and that they reigned in common over the same country.<sup>19</sup>

In his opinion religion, meaning Protestant Christianity was a staple of the political and social context of the United States. To drive home his point, he argued that the vast majority of Americans held Christianity "to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions."<sup>20</sup>

## The Civil Rights Movement: Protest Inspired by Evangelical Faith

It is important to grasp the framework of American religious history in order to interpret accurately our third example of faith and politics, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Following the end of the Civil War, black Americans were still systematically denied civil, social and economic rights. By means of the courts, 20<sup>th</sup> century organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) slowly but surely gained more rights for the African-American population. Yet by the late 1940s, Jim Crow (the slang name for segregation) still remained a dominant force in American life, especially in the South. This ongoing resistance on the part of white America to fully integrate with blacks caused what became known as the Civil Rights movement.

It can be persuasively argued that the Civil Rights movement in America had its roots in the biblical concept of justice. Many of the early preachers, boycotters, and protesters claimed the name of Christ and based their writings and actions on the precepts laid out by the prophets of the Old Testament. And while it's probably unwise to point to any single action or event as triggering the rise of this movement, one viable place to begin is December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. On that day and in that place, a young black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and was summarily arrested for violating the law of bus segregation.

The arrest of Rosa Parks set off a series of events that culminated in a meeting held both inside and outside of the Holt Street Baptist Church the following Monday night, December 5<sup>th</sup>. There, a young black minister by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before a crowd estimated at somewhere between five and ten thousand people and delivered a sermon that cat-

alyzed the Montgomery bus boycott. Tying together American citizenship with biblical principles, King articulated a uniquely Christian rationale for civil disobedience in the so-called 'land of the free'. He began by saying:

We are here in a general sense, because first and foremost, we are American citizens. And we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its means. But we are here in the specific sense because of the bus situation in Montgomery. The situation is not at all new. The problem has existed over endless years. Just the other day – Thursday to be exact – one of the finest citizens in Montgomery – not one of the finest Negro citizens – but one of the finest citizens in Montgomery was taken from a bus and carried to jail and arrested because she refused to give up – to give up her seat to a white person.<sup>21</sup>

King then proceeded to speak of the law, arguing that the arrest of Rosa Parks was questionable, even under the laws of segregation because they were unclear. And then he returned to the character of Rosa Parks noting that 'nobody can doubt the height of her character, nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment.'<sup>22</sup>

The twin themes of Christian activism and the debatable elements of American law were the essence of King's message. He made it clear that they were not advocating violence. "I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people," he said. Listeners said that in order to make his emphasis felt, he put three distinct syllables in the word 'Christian.' That meant that "the only weapon we have in our hands... is the weapon of protest."<sup>23</sup> And then he noted that, given the American context and its emphasis on the rule of law, this was a weapon of great power.

If we were incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a communistic nation, we couldn't do this. If we were trapped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime, we couldn't do this. But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right... There will be nobody among us who will stand up and defy the Constitution of this nation.<sup>24</sup>

But American law had to become consistent with its original intention to reflect the Judeo-Christian emphasis on justice for all. To drive home this point, King went back to the Bible.

If we are wrong – God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth! If we are wrong, justice is a lie. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.<sup>25</sup>

The crowd, well-versed in this passage from Amos, the lowly herdsman prophet of Israel, was swept up by King's reference and swelled to its feet with emotion. Provoked to action by a twenty-six year old Baptist preacher, the boycott was on and the Civil Rights movement began its advance.

Deeply Christian and yet politically and culturally quite complex, the Civil Rights movement ebbed and flowed over the next thirteen years. Some have labeled King's early efforts to bring about justice and equality political evangelism.<sup>26</sup> But it was always more than that. He was first and foremost a pastor, who sought social change by using both political and spiritual means. And this dual emphasis, catalyzed by his brilliant oratory, pervaded the movement.

One example among countless possibilities illustrates this. In the summer of 1961 an unusual group of thirteen people, seven

black males, three white females and three white males, began the first Freedom Ride through the South. Their stated intent was to non-violently counter segregation at bus stops, restaurants, restrooms and various other public establishments. As they journeyed from Virginia into the Deep South, they faced angry crowds that threatened or enacted violence, bombings, and beatings upon them. Eventually, they were arrested and confined to the lower-floor cell block of the Hinds County Jail, Jackson, Mississippi. Mixing protest songs with Christian worship, one of the Freedom Riders, James Bevel, began preaching from Acts 16, the inspiring story of how God sent an earthquake to shake open the doors holding Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail. His goal was to encourage his friends with the hope that God might, likewise, send an earthquake to Jackson to release the Freedom Riders. While no earthquake materialized, fervent prayers were combined with preaching and singing to keep spirits high in the midst of oppressive political circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

Two years later, things had not significantly changed. Jim Crow still dominated the South and despite the combination of non-violent protests and government action, numerous political and religious figures, especially in the South, were using every means at their disposal to reinforce the status quo. In an effort to reinvigorate the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King decided to march on Birmingham in the spring of 1963.

But unlike previous situations where he had the backing of white liberals, certain government officials and the whole black church, this time it was different. King was advised by many to desist and threatened with jail if he proceeded. Convinced of the necessity of this protest, he and a thousand others marched against segregation in the streets of Birmingham on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. King was quickly arrested and taken to the city jail where he produced one of the greatest documents of religiously inspired social disobedience in American history.

At the time, the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' did not make much of a stir. It was a twenty page document, written as both a denunciation and a lament. The former was of the liberal, white preachers who failed to sacrifice themselves for a movement they publicly claimed to believe in. King's wrath fell upon them, because they would not violate the law of man in order to fulfill the law of God. He wrote:

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law but I have longed to hear white ministers say, 'follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother.'<sup>28</sup>

The lament was focused more on the church in America at large. Wondering out loud about the true spiritual condition of both the sheep and the shepherds of America's flocks, King questioned how they could claim to be Christians, believe in America's creed that all men were created equal and yet fail to lift a finger in the cause of civil rights. Driving home his point with a searing irony, King said that he had always prohibited the use of immoral means, such as violence, to promote moral ends. But, "it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means (meaning the law) to preserve immoral ends (such as segregation)."<sup>29</sup> He concluded his brilliant and inspired letter with a claim that reveals as much as anything he ever said or wrote about his clear-cut belief in the marriage of Christian ethics and political reality in the United States of America:

One day the South will recognize its real heroes... One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream

and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers.<sup>30</sup>

Forty-five years later we marvel aloud at the prophetic insight of this statement. And while civil rights, equal justice under the law and the elimination of racism are an ongoing battle within American society, significant progress has been made. That happened because thousands of Christian men and women leveraged the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage to claim their rights under the law. America can be fairly criticized at times for her failure to live up to her ideals and both the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement are monuments to her failures. But when a system of government is rooted in the rule of law and that law is founded upon the dictates of Holy Scripture, progress is always possible.

## Conclusion

Church history may not have 'lessons' it can teach us, but it does illuminate, sometimes quite brightly, the various elements of human life and its intersection with faith. As we've seen in this brief survey, there is an ambiguous and tenuous relationship between the Christian faith and politics. But having recognized that reality, it seems clear that the historical-cultural context in which the Church finds herself significantly influences the way in which she engages the political sphere. Moreover, if the church's past is to serve as any kind of guide to our future, we should take heed that there is no one *right* method for how Christians should engage politics. Different eras, governmental structures and cultural contexts allow for and, may even call for, the application of various political strategies. In our day and place, may we have the

wisdom of the men of Issachar who knew the times and what they needed to do!

<sup>1</sup> Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> John Lukacs, *At the End of an Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Epistle to the Romans, 1946 edition, quoted by Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to 500* (4th edn; London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1963), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2002) pp. 69, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1976) p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Wand, *A History of the Early Church to 500*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 74-75.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustine to Augustine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944).

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 332.

<sup>11</sup> Clyde L. Manschreck, *A History of Christianity in the World* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 262-263.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Johnson, 'God and the Americans,' *Commentary* 99, no. 1 (1995), p. 29 (25-45).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Johnson, 'God and the Americans,' p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King years, 1954-63* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 482-483.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 742.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 743.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 743-744.

# TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

*Sung Wook Chung and Dieumème E. Noelliste*

## Introduction

How is the church to engage the political domain in a manner that preserves its integrity, enhances its witness, and serves the common good? This is a thorny question. Yet, Christians should realize that this is an issue the church cannot avoid and remain faithful to its calling and purpose.

This is so for two fundamental reasons. First, the political realm bears enormously on life. As the community of Jesus Christ who came to make possible the enjoyment of abundant life, the promotion of life is the church's business. And because of its interest in life, the church cannot remain indifferent to things political. Second, Christian faith believes that there is only one God and that this God rules over all, including the political domain. The Bible teaches that the political order owes its very existence to God. The Apostle Paul declares bluntly that, "The powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1, KJV). Further scripture asserts that the divinely assigned purpose of earthly powers is to order societal life in accordance with God's design and will expressed in such ideals as justice, righteousness, and fairness (Rom. 13: 4; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). In light of this teaching we see no justification for the church to shun an area of life which falls so clearly within the purview of God's rule and dominion.



In arguing for the appropriateness and necessity of the church's engagement in the political domain, we are not unmindful of the fact that such a task must be approached advisedly. Indeed, we are convinced that to be Christian, political engagement must have undisputable **theological** underpinnings. Specifically, we are proposing that such an engagement (1) be a conscious response to the mandate given by Christ; (2) that it advocate a mode of life that reflects, albeit faintly, the Trinitarian life; (3) that it be rooted in the church's understanding of its being and role in the world; and (4) that it be motivated by the desire to see society approximate conformity to the ideals of the kingdom that has come at Christ's first coming, and that is yet to be fully consummated at the eschaton (1 Cor. 15:28).

### **The Divine Mandate**

Our Lord Jesus Christ identified us with the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13). This means that the Lord has called his disciples to be the salt of the earth. If we interpret this in the modern context, the church as the community of the Lord's disciples is called to season the world. By calling the church the salt of the world, the Lord confirms and proclaims that the church is a sacred community set apart for the good of the world. The one who sets the church apart is the Lord and part of the purpose for which the church is set apart is the blessing of the world.

Besides saying that the church is the salt of the earth, the Lord admonishes the church to preserve its saltiness. This is critically important. If the church loses its saltiness, the church will experience the tragedy of being thrown out and trampled by the world and consequently be useless to the world. The saltiness that the church should keep is its essential character that prevents the world from being more corrupt and depraved. In any generation

and at any time, the church must ask itself whether it has maintained or lost its saltiness. Today hasn't the church shown signs of corruptness that even exceeds the sorry condition of the world?

In the same text, Matthew 5:14-16, the Lord calls the church the light of the world. Again the purpose for which the church is set apart is the world. Here we have a truth that we need to remember. It is the fact that letting the church's light shine before people is the same as having them see the church's good deeds. In other words, letting our light shine is equal to doing good works. If the church fails to let the people of the world see its good deeds, it fails to fulfill its mission and responsibility. The church needs to demonstrate that it is the community of good deeds. This is a social and missional responsibility that it should take seriously and fulfill faithfully.

It is very important to appreciate here that when the church demonstrates its good deeds, the world will praise the Father in heaven. When the church fulfills its responsibility for the world and wider society, the world has a more compelling reason to recognize the church's God that it has long dismissed and ignored. In other words, when the church fulfills its mission toward society, the goal of creation and redemption, namely, God's glorification is fulfilled!

According to Ephesians 2:8-10, the purpose for which the Lord has saved us is to do good works. After explaining that our salvation is by grace through faith, Paul goes on to state its purpose: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). Of course, our good works are not a necessary condition of our salvation but rather a natural fruit of our redemption. God has prepared the good works in advance for us to do! The good works are therefore not optional add-ons but necessary outgrowths of our salvation. The church should be passionate about doing good works not because it needs them to be saved, but be-

cause it has already experienced a glorious redemption. With grateful hearts for God's grace, Christian church should engage in doing good works.

### **An Emulation of the Divine Life**

On the basis of the mandate discussed above, it seems clear that the state and the society to which Christians belong are the arenas of the church's mission. To say this is to assert in the same breath that the church has a sacred responsibility to demonstrate its good deeds in the political realm since the political domain is part and parcel of these social arenas. But how should the church go about this task? On what pillars should its praxis stand? We would like to argue that a political engagement based on a Trinitarian view of God, and of the church's own self-understanding as a Trinitarian entity provides a suitable theological framework for that task. Our contention is that as Christians we should endeavor to transform our societies and nations into the communities that reflect the communion that the three divine Persons share within the Godhead. In specific terms, this claim has at least four entailments, namely, the celebration of diversity, the pursuit of unity, the demonstration of mutual dependence, and a fellowship of love and service.

Christianity is unique among religions in holding that God is both unity and plurality. It holds that God is one in essence and three in existence. It further teaches that the three entities live in perfect harmony of being, activity, and interdependence. This understanding holds enormous possibilities for Christian social engagement.

Based on this model the church should seek to recognize and respect the great variety of people who are the members of our nation and societies. The United States of America for instance is a

nation composed of very diverse peoples with different values, and different life experiences. Their visions for life are diverse and their standards of living are different. We need to celebrate and respect such diversity. Diversity is the principle of God's mode of being and the created order. If a community suppresses diversity and assimilates all people into abstract uniformity, it is contrary to the principle of the divine being as triune. An example among many where the political system is characterized by dictatorial uniformity is North Korea. Such a community oppresses the diversity among individuals and abuses basic human rights. Our society and nation should become the communities that embrace, respect, and celebrate diversity among their members so that they may become as healthy and sound communities as possible.

However, such respect and celebration of diversity should not degenerate into disorderly conflict and division. We should be committed to, and pursue, oneness and unity while respecting and celebrating diversity. Today, American society seems to be degenerating into disorderly conflict and division among its members, way beyond respect for and celebration of diversity. Oneness and unity have lost their places. Ideological conflict is serious and the conflict between politicians and ordinary people is worsening. We even speak of culture wars. American society seems to demonstrate symptoms of unhealthiness in many aspects.

In this context, Christians should lead a life, which recognizes and respects diversity among the members of the larger society, while doing their best to foster oneness and unity among themselves and the members of society. We should be able to model for the world a lifestyle, which recognizes and respects diversity as well as pursues and promotes unity and oneness (Eph 4:1-16). By demonstrating such a lifestyle, we may influence the larger society to follow our model.

Christians are responsible for presenting constructive alternatives for the directions that our society and nation should take.

Christians should be able to propose the kind of national identity our society should be oriented to and the kind of goals our nation should pursue. In addition, the church should be able to come up with productive alternatives for strategies and tactics that our society should take in order to accomplish these goals. Without implementing concrete strategies and tactics, we cannot solve the problems of society and nation.

Taking their cue from the triune God, Christians have the responsibility to form relationships of mutual participation and mutual dependence with themselves and others members of society without compromising their integrity. The Lord has never commanded us to leave the world. Rather, he sent us into the world and commanded us to preach the gospel to all the peoples of the world. We can be in the world without being of the world. The gospel of the kingdom of God is the good news about forgiveness salvation, and eternal life as well as about Trinitarian communion of intimate fellowship. Therefore, Christians should endeavor to become knowledgeable of the life of other members of society and find ways to participate in it. In particular, we should know deeply how the poor among us are living and how the orphans and widows are surviving in our nation. Furthermore, we should deeply know how the alienated including the disabled and aliens are leading their lives in our society. As opportunities present themselves, we should participate in their lives. The Lord Jesus himself urges such attentiveness when he identifies himself with the needy of society and declares that "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). Can there be any more compelling motivation for active involvement in the lives of others than this?

In addition, we need to realize that we are in a relationship of mutual dependence with other members of our society and nation. The consciousness of election that redemptively only Christians are God's people should not be permitted to make us feel

proud. Rather, we should humble ourselves and maintain a relationship of mutual help with other members of our society. Through such a life of mutual help, the seed of the gospel can be planted into the hearts of those who do not know Jesus Christ yet. According to Exodus 19:5-6, the reason the Lord made the people of Israel his possession is for the people of Israel to become a nation of priests for all the nations of the world. In a similar vein, the reason the Lord has made us his possession and sent us to our society and nation is for us to play a role as priests for our society and nation. In other words, God has raised us as reconcilers between God and our society (2 Cor. 5:18ff.).

The fellowship that the Godhead shares is characterized by love, service, and mutual support. In John 17:25, Jesus extols the relation of love that exists between him and the Father. At his baptism the Father affirmed his deep love for the Son. There, too, like a supporting family, the Father and Spirit were present and active at this critical juncture of the Son's life and ministry. The Son, in turn, made it clear that his life was devoted to serve the Father and do his bidding in perfect submission (John 6:38).

In emulation of the divine attitude Christians should demonstrate fellowship of love and service among themselves and with other members of our society and nation (Gal. 6:10). We should recognize, take care of, exalt, respect, and welcome them. Nowadays, Christians are often criticized for being more stingy and selfish than non-Christians. This is not good and we should repent of it. Shouldn't Christians be praised for their life of love? Moreover, our fellowship of love with others should be deepened by our service and sacrifice. Our Lord loved and embraced sinners and the world. God the Father sent his Son to the world because he so loved the world (John 3:16). Our Lord served sinners and the world and sacrificed himself for them (Mark 10:45). We should imitate our Lord's lifestyle of service and sacrifice.

Clearly if we take our cue from the Triune God, we should be

cognizant of our responsibility to encourage all the members of our society and nation to lead a life of mutual love, service, and sacrifice. We should strive to promote the ethos of love, service, and sacrifice in our society and nation. We should demonstrate to other members of society and nation that the life of love, service, and sacrifice brings true meaning to our life. And we should do our best to help them experience the meaningful and abundant life that Jesus came to make possible. In so doing, our action might encourage our society and nation to imitate the community of unity and fellowship that the triune God enjoys. Through this process, the seed of the gospel can be sown into the hearts of other members of society and this may serve as an incentive for them to turn to the Lord through the work of the Holy Spirit. This may result in the transformation and possibly the transformation of their communities as well.

### The Agent: The Church as Representative of the Triune God

The burden of the previous section was to challenge the church to view its engagement in the political arena as a push for the endorsement of a mode of community life patterned after the divine life. But to do this, something else is needed: the church needs to be conscious of its own identity and fundamental role in the world.

What is the church and what is it here for? In his book, *The Church*, Edmund Clowney makes a point that bears repeating. He says that the church is not just a religious club or a voluntary association of friends who engage in joint pursuits.<sup>1</sup> No, the church is a profoundly theological entity first and foremost related to the triune God. To put it succinctly, the church is the chosen people of God, constituted into the community of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit.

This Trinitarian understanding is in full accord with Scripture. In the Old Testament, God refers to Israel as his chosen and peculiar people (Exod. 4:19). The New Testament writers boldly apply this concept to the new people of God. In Ephesians 2:19, Paul informs the Gentile members of the church that they are "no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." And with this Peter agrees. He says that Christians are a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, belonging to God" (1 Pet. 2:9, 10).

But for the New Testament writers, this new people of God are inextricably connected to Christ. It is Christ's redemptive work which brought it into being. Furthermore, Christ himself is the foundation upon which it is built and the head which nurtures and guides it (Eph. 2:20, 4:15-16). The connection is so close that Christ claims the church as "my church" (Matt. 16:18).

But if the church is Christ's own, its actual constitution into the community of Christ is the work of the Spirit. According to Paul, "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body . . . and we were all given the one spirit to drink" (2 Cor. 12:13). Therefore, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). As Clowney says, "The Spirit makes the church the people of God and joins the people to Christ."<sup>2</sup> Put differently, "The church is the people of God, the assembly of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

By virtue of its connection to the triune God, the church is a peculiar people. It is a divine society implanted in the midst of the wider society. It is God's nation scattered throughout human nations. It is a heavenly citizenry living among an earthly citizenry (Phil. 3:20).

But what is the significance of this view of the church for the issue at hand? Put simply, it is this self-understanding that provides the authority and ground for the church to advocate for a mode of life patterned after the life of the triune God. Here is our

logic. If the church is God's society within the wider society then its reason for being is to represent God in, and to, that society. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul describes the church as the temple of God, making it a symbol of God's presence in the world, just as the Old Testament tabernacle was a symbol of God's presence to the Israelites. Paul also speaks of Christians as Christ's ambassadors. This, too, speaks of the church's representational role. As a company of God's appointed ambassadors, it is charged with representing God's cause, God's interest, and God's values to the rest of the society where it is implanted.

### The Motivation: Passion for Kingdom-driven Transformation

Behind the push for the endorsement of a mode of life that reflects the divine life, and the effort to faithfully represent God as a means to promote that goal, lies the passion to see society transformed into conformity with the ideals of the kingdom. In our view, the cause of a kingdom inspired transformation is advanced when the church engages the political domain in the following four-fold praxiological fashion.

First, the church serves as an instrument of social transformation by being an authentic symbol of the new creation that God pledges to bring about. In the midst of the old order it is to be a living example or a sample of the new humanity that God desires to fashion. It is to be the prefigurement of the rule of God for human socialness. John Howard Yoder puts it succinctly and beautifully when he says, "The people of God is to be called today what the whole world is called to be ultimately."<sup>4</sup>

Second, the church discharges its transformational role when it behaves as a counter community, an alternative society with a culture of its own that is markedly different from the dominant

culture. The church is called to be in the world, and not of the world (John 17:14-15). The church is called to a specific form of life or culture, which cannot be simply superimposed upon the existing form of life or culture of any society. As Douglas Harink argues the church is not the religious coating of social systems but a subversive presence, which seeks "the transformation of this system according to the way of Christ."<sup>5</sup> And the church performs such a transforming role just by being itself. Yoder is helpful here again when he asserts that "*The order of the faith community constitutes a public offer to the entire society . . .* To participate in the transforming process of becoming the faith community *is itself* to speak the prophetic word, *is itself* the beginning of the transformation of the cosmos."<sup>6</sup>

Third, the church's transformational role in society is fulfilled when it functions as an uncompromised prophet articulating to the powers that be the will of God for societal life. This is the specifically political aspect of the church's representational assignment. And to carry it out well the church must be keenly interested in the politics, programs, plans, and legislations put forth by secular government with a view to determining whether or not they are in line with the divine ideal of justice, equity, and fairness. As we said at the beginning of this essay, God's purpose for secular government is the service and promotion of society's good. Government is God's servant commissioned to enhance the common good. When this purpose is not served, the church as the representative of God is obligated to speak to the powers that be the uncompromising word of God in the manner that Nathan did to King David (2 Sam. 12). It must speak the right word in the right way at the right time. Itself a servant, it must call and challenge the other servant to faithfulness to the divinely entrusted task.

Such a stance should never be adversarial, arrogant, and combative however. It should be firm, but winsome. The purpose

should always be positive: persuade the powers to align themselves with God's purposes.

The tenor of our discourse thus far may give the impression that the engagement called for here applies only to the church understood as a corporate entity and limited to its official activity. This is not our intention. While we firmly believe in the necessity of the church's corporate witness, we also hold that since the individual Christian, like the corporate church, is closely related to the triune God through the indwelling of the Spirit, (2 Cor. 3), each believer is obligated to advocate for the endorsement of the divine life in society by faithfully representing God in words and deeds in their respective station in life. Regardless of their vocation, each is called to embrace the ethical task of being salt and light and shining like a star in the universe, holding forth the word of truth in the midst of a morally decadent world (Matt. 5:14; Phil. 2:14).

## Conclusion

We already know that this fallen world will not be able to change into the perfect kingdom of God. The consummate and complete kingdom of God will come from heaven vertically when the Lord comes again at the end of human history. Nevertheless, through the church's ministry to embody Trinitarian spirituality in society and nation, the kingdom of God, which has already come to the world, will be visible more and progress further and the kingdom values will be promoted and spread further. At the same time, the progress of the kingdom of God will make an impact upon society, politics, economy, and culture of the world. As a result, our society and nation will be transformed into communities that resemble more the holy communion of the triune God.

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), pp. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public & Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 28-29 (emphasis original).

# TOUGH TIMES, BOLD WITNESS

*Gerald Gallimore*

## Introduction

Our assignment is to reflect on the theme "The Christian and Political Engagement." I must admit that, depending on the level of one's Christian maturity, socio political consciousness or level of political bias, this subject can be challenging, sensitive, controversial, unwelcomed and even divisive.

Many Christians come from church traditions that look down on any involvement in the political process. For them, politics is considered anathema, dirty, and the epitome of worldliness and carnality. They find justification for this position in every news report, which highlights the flaws and failures of those holding or seeking elected office. This group condemns with equal force any Christian perceived to be advocating any other position. For them, escape from the political domain is the only acceptable Christian posture.

Others, however, understand their role as engagement in the life of society, rather than escape. These Christians make all of life's decisions, including those with political implications from the position of their prior commitment to the faith and the principles enshrined in God's word. But within this group we find Christians who are so immersed in their political views that they look at life and even issues of faith through the lens of their political commitment.

As we know only too well, there is usually a tension and sometimes even open hostility between Christians in these camps. Proponents of each position believe that, if Jesus were living in America today, he would identify more with their group rather than with the other. There are, of course, deeply committed Christians on each side of the political divide. Even so, sometimes, Christians act as if Jesus were Republican, Democrat or Independent. Invariably, within the context of our faith, the expression 'political activism' causes red lights to go off.

### **Biblical Warrants**

There was a time when I myself considered the very suggestion that the Bible had anything to do with politics almost blasphemous. But, then I took off my blinkers and read the Scriptures again and found that, indeed, the Bible has a lot to say about the subject. I found in its pages reports about people in power, about people holding on to power, about people losing power, and about the sordid atmosphere of political intrigue underpinning the lure of power.

Consider, for instance, the story of Moses and Pharaoh. Moses, a man of God, the lawgiver of Israel, the spiritual giant of the Old Testament, takes up the case of an oppressed and disenfranchised people held in cruel slavery and bondage in the land of the superpower of the day. In the name of God, and with nothing but the rod of God in his hands and justice on his side he confronted powerful Pharaoh and commanded him to let God's people go. Is this not the epitome of the believer in political engagement? Moses' involvement led to the exodus, that epochal event to which the Israelites and Christians alike turn for inspiration. Was it not the emancipation of that enslaved people which resulted in an independent nation?

Consider, as well, the story of Saul and David. After David's heroic defeat of the giant Goliath, he gains national attention, and generates a wave of excitement among the populace. His name is on every lip causing the incumbent power holder to feel that David is a threat. In Saul's view David has become a political liability and must be stopped by all means—fair or foul. Right here in the Bible we see the face of ugly politics!

Or, think of the story of David and Absalom. Here, we have a story of political intrigue, character assassination, and political violence ending in tragedy. Consider, too, the story of Queen Bathsheba lobbying to ensure a particular political outcome. Think of the story of Esther, Mordecai and Haman. Here is a story of betrayal, intrigue and political involvement at the highest level. Time does not allow us to consider the political engagement of Daniel in Babylon, Nehemiah in Persia, John the Baptist and Herod, nor the public role of the Old Testament prophets in exposing corruption and unrighteousness, and calling for justice and righteousness to be established in society.

What of Jesus Christ himself? Was He political? On the one hand, one can reply to this question with a resounding 'no'! He never formed a political party. He took no known steps to influence the policies of Herod, Pilate or Caesar. He renounced all attempts by his followers to make him a political figure.

Yet, on the other hand, we can answer in the positive. He was political, for he proclaimed the inbreaking of another kingdom—the kingdom of God. He outlined its manifesto in the Sermon on the Mount and prescribed the characteristics of its citizens, its values and standards, all of which challenged the status quo of his day. At his trial, his kingship was perceived as a challenge to Caesar's (John 19:12). His teachings in Matthew 5:13-16 about his disciples being 'salt and light' have fundamental and inescapable implications for the impact Christians must have in society and on society. It means that as Christians we are necessary for the



common good. We must endeavor to have an impact that makes a difference in society.

Indeed, in the balance of this presentation I would like to contend that the motif of salt and light says that the Christian *must be involved in society at all times, especially when the issue is right, the cause just, and the circumstances dire and urgent.* To do so, I will turn to the story of the very first Christians as told of in Acts 5:12-24. My aim is to identify insights that we can learn about the engagement of Christians in this most important sector of the public square.

This story comes from the first century, sometime around AD 30. The authorities of that day were not comfortable with the presence of believers in Christ among them. They did not like their message about sin, and salvation through Jesus Christ alone. The power brokers of society did not approve of the message of resurrection either. They were not happy with the idea that Jesus, who was crucified and buried, risen in triumph from the dead, was now calling men and women everywhere to repent. They did not like the message or the messengers, so they took strong measures to intimidate them into silence. "It is unlawful," they said, "to speak, preach or to teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4: 18). They forbade witnessing in public places or else! Intimidation is the use of threats or of authority to frighten, scare, and terrify people into silence, retreat, or capitulation.

That was AD 30. Now it is AD 2009. The story recorded for us by Luke in this text could easily be yesterday's or today's news headlines somewhere in the world. There is an active agenda all around us to intimidate Christians into silence, retreat, or capitulation. We must wake up to this reality. For as Thomas Jefferson counseled this nation many years ago, "Eternal vigilance is still the price of freedom!"<sup>1</sup> But how shall we accomplish this? I detect four useful insights from the praxis of the early Christians.

## Cultural Awareness

The world and its systems are rarely ever at peace with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In John 16:33, Jesus said: "In the world you shall have tribulation". And in John 15:18-20 he warned: "the world will hate you like it hated me before it hated you." This is strong language, which may be out of sync with today's concern for politically correct speech. But the truth is that the message of Jesus Christ and biblical morality are often out of step with a culture that finds itself under the influence of power brokers who still choose Barabbas over Jesus.

This world is a fallen world governed by a system in opposition to the kingdom of God. We live in a world where right has become wrong, and wrong has become right. This is a world where abstinence is considered foolish but condoms wise. This is a world where the nests of certain birds are protected by law, but the womb of a woman is open for plunder. Pornography has reached epidemic proportions in our culture. Corruption, greed, unrighteousness, irresponsibility, and deception have devastated our financial institutions and sabotaged our economy. Family values desperately need renewal: marriage is now suffering from multiple personality disorder. And unfortunately, on these matters some sections of the church seem to have lost their Christian bearings.

Certainly, morally the culture is on the decline. But it is in the midst of this decadent culture that our Lord has placed us. It is in this culture that we must live out and proclaim the soul saving, life transforming, culture redeeming gospel of the crucified, risen, exalted Son of God. He is the only medicine by which a sick culture can be made whole and sinful people be made right with a holy God. People, in their sin, rebel against this message. As it did then in the first century, society today seeks to rein in, silence, and discredit this kind of proclamation. The weapons then were

censorship and incarceration. The courts of the land would dictate the agenda for the church. It told what they could and could not preach, what they could say and not say. The courts forbade the use of the name of Jesus in the public place or 'you will get in trouble with the law.'

The world and its systems often try to censor and restrict the gospel of Christ. But remember my main contention: *sometimes when the issue is right, the cause just, and the circumstance dire and urgent, the Christian is compelled to engage the world of politics.*

### Courageous Resistance

To the summons and prohibition of the powers that be the Christians responded with a firm no! Their stance was clear: "We will not be silent; we will not obey your rulings and your restrictions, regardless of arrest, imprisonment, beatings or legislation." "For we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 4:29). They refuse to be intimidated: "We cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard!" (v. 20)

Today, too many Christians limit their actions to simply bemoaning how bad things are. They are running scared, keeping silent while the enemies of the faith systematically carry out their pernicious agenda to remove every symbol of the Christian faith from the public square, and strip the history of this nation of its Christian roots. The Bible has been removed from our schools, the Ten Commandments from our courts, and "Under God" from our Pledge of Allegiance. Now, the national motto "In God We Trust" has been eliminated from Capitol Visitor Center in Washington. We need to wake up to the fact that others are eliminating references to our nation's Christian heritage from the history books that our children and grandchildren are required to read, and from the monuments that will influence posterity.

But happily, there are still persons like Peter, John and the other apostles, whose strong conviction emboldens them to resist the threat of intimidation and the command to be silent.

This is encouraging. History has shown the impact that even one person who is totally committed to a God-given task can have. The names of individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., John Wesley, Nelson Mandela, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Martin Luther, among many others, come to mind. Today, if God should lay some challenging task upon your heart, if like Nehemiah, he should call you to be a repairer of the breach, remember that one person with God is a majority. Bear in mind that, like Elijah on Mt. Carmel, one person with God can take on a whole establishment.

Ah... but when the collective body of Christ catches a vision and acts together in unison, like these men in Acts chapter 5, the impact can be much more powerful. In Acts we have an example of courageous action by the leadership of the church representing several thousands of believers (Acts 2:41; 5:14, 16). Their collective strength impacted, restrained and constrained the court's ruling. It is critical to note that the resistance they put forth was not for the purpose of gaining secular power for themselves. It was to declare for all times the sovereign place of the kingdom of God among people. The eminent jurist Gamaliel recognized this principle, when he convinced the Council about the supremacy of the kingdom of God and cautioned against putting restraints on God's message (Acts 5:38-40).

Perhaps, it was that same principle which informed the founders of our nation when they enacted the First Amendment, an amendment designed to protect religious liberty from encroachment by the state, not to shield American society from religion. Here is an example of the body of Christ responding courageously to the challenges of the day, and thereby, making a significant impact in the public arena. There is no question that

we must heed Paul's clear admonition to Christians to be law-abiding people and to live in submission to the governing authority (Rom. 13:1-5). But, as Dr. Vernon Grounds says in *Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility*, "Obedience must stop whenever the edicts of the state conflict with the supreme duty of rendering to God the things that are God's."<sup>2</sup>

### World Transcending Loyalty

In keeping with the spirit of our theme, I want to suggest that the Christian has two primary relationships: a relationship to the kingdom of heaven and a relationship to the earthly kingdom. Whether we like it or not, we are citizens of these two realms. We are citizens of heaven, and we are also citizens of the Republic of the United States of America. And we have sacred responsibilities to both. To the latter we pay taxes and to former we pay tithes. We are required to obey the laws of civic society and we are also required to obey the precepts of the redeemed society.

But here is the crux of the matter. While our Christian identity should make us more responsible citizens in our communities, we must never lose sight of this truth: the Christian has a loyalty and a commitment that is beyond earthly loyalties. This means that the Christian cannot pledge ultimate allegiance to Caesar or to Caesar's flag. Above Caesar and Caesar's flag are Christ and his cross. Caesar and the nation for which he stands must be judged by the cross of Christ and the principles for which he died.

More specifically, this means that the Christian cannot commit himself/herself without reservation to a political party, for party allegiance always stands second to his/her allegiance to Christ and his kingdom.

But having said that, I must stress that this recognition of the primacy of the heavenly citizenship is no loss to society. Indeed, it

is a national asset. For a nation is strongest when its citizens are God fearing, when they are people of character, honesty and integrity. It is in its best shape when its people are committed to strong family life, and involved in the public welfare for the common good, because they are motivated by their obedience to God. Peter and the apostles, teach us that for them the gospel stood above all earthly systems. Is that where it is for us?

The world in which they lived, and the one in which we live, calls for people who know their God, who are committed to the standards of his word, and who believe that God will vindicate their stand.

### Social Penetration

I call us to ponder once again to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as he sets out the manifesto of his kingdom and the principles by which its citizens must live. "You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world!" (Mat. 5:13-16).

As salt, we are to penetrate the structures of society for the common good. Society needs Christians who have not lost their saltiness, and whose good works bring glory to the Father in heaven. We should note that Jesus did not say we are the sugar of the earth, but we are the salt of the earth!

Like light, we are to help bring clarity and illumination to difficult issues in the public square with a view to helping elected officials govern wisely. We are the light of the world; we should shine! We are the salt of the earth, therefore, we are to protect and preserve what is good and worth keeping in the culture.

Clearly our response as Christians should not be escapism—be it theological or psychological. In his High Priestly prayer, the Lord Jesus clearly says that he wants us in the world: "Father, I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but, please

Father keep them from the evil one. As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:15, 18). What the Lord is prescribing in this seminal text is insulation, not isolation; engagement, not escape.

Feeling that the issues were right, the cause just, and the circumstances dire and urgent, Peter and his generation engaged their world and its systems. These early Christians served notice on their contemporaries that there was 'salt' in their society. They let the common people, as well as the power structure of their day, know that there were people among them who marched to a different drumbeat and answered to a higher authority. In their day they impacted all of life and engaged the powers in Jerusalem by their passion and their teaching about the risen Christ and his life transforming power!

What of us today? Is the salt losing its flavor? Has the salt lost its sting? Have we locked up the salt in a salt shaker, when Jesus intended it to infiltrate society with a view to changing it? By our silence, have we emboldened others to speak? Has our withdrawal given room for others to occupy? And has our neglect called into question the relevance of the faith?

Have we, evangelicals, in reaction to the so called 'social gospel' of liberal theology, swung the pendulum too far to the other side, and in so doing privatized the gospel, pietized Christianity, and withdrawn it from the public square—the very place where Jesus intended for us to take it?

### **Charge and Conclusion**

If we are to be faithful to the Lord and the witness of our forbearers, we must abandon such an artificial dichotomy and begin to preach the gospel of the kingdom, of which salvation is the necessary entry point.

Salvation is the entry point to that kingdom, but we must not stop here. We must move persons from the lobby of the kingdom its main hall. We must expose them to the whole counsel of God. We must bring them to the recognition that the earth is the Lord's. He is King! He is creator! He is Saviour! He is Sustainer! All things were made by him and for him whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. And in him alone all things consist and hold together! (Col. 1:16). No area, no domain, no institution is exempt from the authority of the One who called us to be salt and light. We must not hand over our communities, our nations or our world to the devil and his agents. Instead, as his change agents we must take his message, his word, his truth, his gospel into the world.

If we are to impact our society and our nation, we must recover a faith that influences our thinking and actions in every arena of life. Because Christians before us understood this, slavery was fought, education was provided for the disenfranchised, educational institutions were built on the truths of God's Word, child labor was abolished, hospitals were established, leprosariums were built, innumerable charities were launched, institutions for caring for the poor, the handicapped and the aged were established, racism was fought, a free press established and the list goes on. All this was done in the name of Christ by Christians who understood they were to be "salt and light" in their nations.

They did this because they saw clearly that, besides being an personal faith, Christianity embodies a cultured mandate, which is best carried out when Christians develop a kingdom mentality and embrace a kingdom world view.

As Chuck Colson says in *How Now Shall We Live*: "We must show the world that Christianity is more than a private belief, more than personal salvation. We must show that it is a comprehensive life system that answers all of humanities questions. Turning our backs on the culture is a betrayal of our Biblical mandate,

because it denies God's sovereignty over all of life."<sup>3</sup> The early disciples did not turn their backs in retreat. They refused to be silenced, despite threats, arrest, imprisonment and floggings. They did this because they realized clearly that *sometimes when the issues are right, the cause just, and the circumstances dire and urgent, the Christian is compelled to engage the world and its systems*. They made a difference. Will we?

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<sup>1</sup> For this and other notable quotes from Thomas Jefferson, see [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Jefferson](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson). (Editors: This website says that this line, although often attributed to Jefferson, probably comes from someone else.)

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Grounds, *Evangelicalism and Social Responsibility*, ed. and with an Introduction by M. D. Carroll R. (Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics Monograph Series 1; Littleton, CO: Vernon Grounds Institute for Public Ethics, 2008), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Colson with Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), p. xi.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE VERNON GROUNDS INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ETHICS

In every age, God raises persons who not only have a keener sense of his ideals for life in community than their contemporaries, but who also have the courage and foresight to pursue these ideals for themselves and the ability to lead others to do the same. For more than a generation Vernon Grounds has played such a prophetic and catalytic role in the arena of social ethics within the evangelical community. In doing so, he has established a legacy of Christian witness in the social domain that has been hailed by many as epoch-making and pace-setting.

It is to perpetuate Vernon's legacy of a vigorous Christian engagement in the public domain that the Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics was established at Denver Seminary, where he has given a lifetime of dedicated service.

In embracing this task, and keenly aware of Dr. Ground's lifelong stance, the Institute makes several bedrock commitments. First, it is committed to always anchoring its teaching and position in the Word of God. Second, it will endeavor to remain true to the Christian world view and the evangelical understanding of Christian faith. And, driven by the passion to see these resources brought to bear on social reality with a view to transforming it for the better, it further commits itself to pursuing an ethical agenda that will seek to be as all embracing as its means allows.

From what has been said so far, it should be clear that VGI's arena of endeavor is social ethics. But it needs to be said that, in laboring that realm its mission is mainly educational. More precisely, what it aims to do is provide an environment, resources, and tools with a view to sensitizing, educating and training Christians in a broad array of ethical issues so that they may be empowered and equipped to fulfill the biblical mandate to be "salt and light" in a morally decadent world (Matt 5:13; Phil.2:16). As used here, the term Christian is meant to embrace several groupings: students in training, Christian leaders, lay persons and the broader Christian community.

In the pursuit of this educational mission, VGI intends to employ a variety of delivery modes, including lectures, workshops, seminars, informal discussions and the printed matters. But, keenly aware of the enormity of the task and of its own limitations, VGI welcomes partnership with others who are also interested in a comprehensive and robust Christian witness in the public square for the glory of God.

*Dieumène Noelliste*  
*Director of the Vernon Grounds*  
*Institute of Public Ethics*  
*Professor of Theological Ethics*  
*Denver Seminary*

This volume represents the second installment in the Grounds Institute of Public Ethics Monograph Series. Although we know that there are many ethical issues that deserve attention at any given time, the Institute has chosen to focus on a single theme each year. For the first year of operation of the Institute, the decision was made to concentrate on issues pertaining to Christian faith and politics. The concern was to explore the way in which Christian faith might be able to prompt politics to greater conformity to God's will for life in community. In one way or another, this note is sounded throughout the book. While analyzing this theme from different angles, the contributors concur that if Christian faith is leveraged appropriately it can exert a positive influence on the political. This influence, in turn, can redound to the betterment of our common life and greater service to the common good.

The four chapters that form the present collection were presentations made at two of the Institute's main annual events. The first three chapters were papers given at the Salt and Light Seminar in the spring of 2009; the fourth was a message delivered at the Rally for the Common Good held in the winter of the same year.

**Chapter One: Human Government: Biblical Foundations**

*M. Daniel Carroll R.*

**Chapter Two: The Lessons of History on Faith and Politics**

*Scott A. Wenig*

**Chapter Three: Toward a Theology of Political Engagement**

*Sung Wook Chung and Dieumème Noelliste*

**Chapter Four: Tough Times, Bold Witness**

*Gerald Gallimore*

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