

Baptist Polity, Biblical Theology, and Responsible Citizenship

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The Problem

When refugee Separatist/Dissenter John Smyth encountered the Waterlander Mennonites and their idea of believer's baptism, the major predispositions of modern Baptists entered our genome: dissent, an inability or unwillingness to cooperate and accommodate, and borrowed theology, specifically, an ecclesiology. Smyth, and the congregation of refugees with him, rather quickly expanded their Separatist views to include Anabaptist ideas about believer's baptism, the constitution of the church, and the separation of church and state. Indeed, Smyth eventually joined the Mennonites; his name, with the title elder, appears on the wall of the church. Thomas Helwys and a small group, however, could not assent to Mennonite Christology or their positions on oath-taking and, particularly, the sword.¹

As regards revenge, that is, to oppose an enemy with the sword, we believe and confess that the Lord Christ has forbidden and set aside to His disciples and followers all revenge and retaliation, and commanded them to render to no one evil for evil, or cursing for cursing, but to put the sword into the sheath, or, as the prophets have predicted, to beat the swords into ploughshares.²

¹ Mark Robert Bell, *Apocalypse How? Baptist Movements During the English Revolution* (Mercer University Press, 2000); James R. Coggin, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*. (Herald Press, 1991); Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Mercer University Press, 2003).

² Article 14, "Dordrecht Confession of Faith (Mennonite, 1632)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1632;
[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht_Confession_of_Faith_\(Mennonite,_1632\)&oldid=128687](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Dordrecht_Confession_of_Faith_(Mennonite,_1632)&oldid=128687) (accessed March 3, 2016). The sixth article ("Concerning the Sword") of the much earlier Schleithem Confession goes on to address three specific questions about the Christian use of the sword, answering all in the negative: (1) May a Christian use the sword to defend and protect the good? No. (2) May a Christian issue verdicts in legal matters? No. (3) May Christians serve in the magistracy? No. John Christian Wenger, trans., "The Schleithem Confession of Faith, 1527," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945), 250.

Although himself a near pacifist who suspected that governments could always declare virtually any war to be defensive, Helwys was unwilling to rule out defense as a justification for the use of force. Consequently, in Article 24 of his 1611 “Declaration of Faith,” Helwys described the “Magistracy” as “a Holy ordinance of GOD,” citing Romans 13, 2 Peter 2:10, and 1 Timothy 2:1, 4. Magistrates “bear the sword of GOD....”³

Helwys, and many of the early English Baptists, seem to have been wary of the Anabaptists’ propensity for radical, even revolutionary political activity, such as the German Peasant Revolt (1524-25) and the Münster Rebellion (1534-35). Indeed, in the first generation after Helwys, English Baptists appeared in significant numbers in the ranks of the revolutionary “Fifth Monarchy Men”⁴ (1649-1661) and even participated in the failed attempt, called Venner’s Rising, to gain control of London in January 1661. In the pamphlets and tracts that were the Facebook and Twitter of the day, the opponents of Baptists branded them Anabaptist and explicitly likened them to the Münsterites. The sting of these accusations echoes in the significant series of Baptist confessions of faith from the period:

...we are to make supplication and prayer for Kings, and all that are in authority, that under them we may live a peaceable and quiet life in all godliness and honesty.

...remembering always we ought to obey God rather than men, and grounding upon the commandment, commission, and promise of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ....⁵

We believe that there ought to be civil Magistrates in all Nations, for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well....⁶

³ “A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland” (1611); <http://evangelicalarminians.org/helwys-declaration-of-faith-the-first-baptist-confession/> (accessed March 3, 2016).

⁴ See Louise Fargo Brown, *The Political Activities of the Baptists and the Fifth Monarchy Men in England During the Interregnum* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1912).

⁵ Articles 48, 51, “London Baptist Confession of 1644”; <http://www.reformedreader.org/cc/h.htm> (accessed March 3, 2016).

God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, has ordained civil magistrates to be under him, over the people, for his own glory and the public good....⁷

With respect to government, these confessions make three assertions. First, of course, they state that church and state are distinct from one another. Second, they affirm that, contrary to popular opinion, Baptists are not anarchists and certainly do not endorse revolution against properly constituted authority, that they will *obey the state* – for the most part. Third, they conclude that the Baptists making these confessions hope to be left to practice their faith undisturbed by civil authority, but that, if they must, they will resist state interference, that they will *disobey the state* in matters of conscience if need be, knowing that the state may punish this disobedience. Notably, while these Baptist confessions beseech government to acknowledge the distinction between church and state, they pay virtually no attention to defining the role of divinely ordained and properly constituted government – apart, perhaps from acknowledging a governmental role in “the punishment of evil doers, and...the praise of them that do well.”⁸ Incidentally, this language reflects Romans 13:1, arguably Paul’s attempt to assuage Roman fears that the early Christians, like some Anabaptists, were anarchists and revolutionaries.

Not surprisingly, the language of these early Baptist confessions can be flowery and, well, wordy. By the time of the production of the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, Baptists in America no longer included an article specifically on government, the oath, or the sword. Instead, Article 18 on “Religious Liberty,” reproduced unchanged in the 1963

⁶ Article 25, “A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith” (London 1660); <http://www.reformedreader.org/ccf/h.htm> (accessed March 3, 2016).

⁷ Chapter 24, “Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689”; <http://www.arbca.com/1689-chapter24> (accessed March 3, 2016) = Chapter 25 of “The Philadelphia Confession of Faith” (1742); <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/philadelphia-confession.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2016).

⁸ Article 25, “A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith.”

and 2000 revisions, focuses on the impermeable boundary between church and state. The only explicit reference to the function of government maintains that,

Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God.

Baptists, and other descendants of the Radical Reformation, do not have a theology of civil society/government, but need one. Baptists define civil society/government negatively via our unique Anabaptist ecclesiology and our Enlightenment insistence on freedom of conscience (related to, but not the same as the *libertas ecclesiae*), on the one hand, and minimally, on the other, based on Romans 13 and related texts. The situation results in circumstances, which the Anabaptists seem to have anticipated, such as the recent refusal of Kim Davis, County Clerk of Rowan County, Kentucky, to fulfill her oath of office over her objections to gay marriage. How does our branch of the Church negotiate the tension established by simultaneously: insisting, properly, on the separation of the *institutions* of church and state; acknowledging government as divinely-ordained; and neglecting to announce *how* government should fulfill its proper role. With great admiration for his insistence that the church must bear counter-cultural witness, I cannot see the wisdom in what seems to me an abdication of responsibility when Stanley Hauerwas, to name but an example, declares

I simply do not believe that Christians need any theory of the state to inform or guide their witness in whatever society they happen to find themselves...I simply believe that the state – which can take the form of any group that provides order, from Augustine’s robber bands to North Carolina to the United States of America – exists.⁹

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Epilogue: A Pacifist Response to the Bishops,” in *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism* (Paul Ramsey, ed.; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 99 as cited in H. David Baer, *Recovering Christian Realism: Just War Theory as a Political Ethic* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 8-9.

Since, obviously, such a negative or non-definition does not provide guidance on how Christians can or should *participate in* governing civil society,¹⁰ the question arises as to what theological doctrine or doctrines ought to provide the foundation for a *positive* statement of the purpose and role of social and governmental institutions that are *not* the church.

A Pursuit Worthy of the Effort

Before asking whether some other variety of Christianity ascribes to a suitable theology of government available for appropriation (no), reviewing the Bible's disinterest in prescribing a *form* of government, and ultimately proposing a basis in biblical theology for a *positive* Christian approach *toward* government, it may helpful to set some boundaries and outline some practical objectives. After six warnings establishing what is "out-of-bounds," we will consider three reasons to play the game.

First, of course, Christians must always remember that our primary citizenship is in, and our sole allegiance is to, the Kingdom of God; and we must behave accordingly. Allegiance to the nation-state is idolatry¹¹ and reflects a pseudo-soteriology.¹² It is idolatry because it involves a penultimate entity calling for ultimate devotion. It is pseudo-soteriology because it confuses the state with the source of all blessing.¹³

¹⁰ Ronald J. Sider ("Toward and Evangelical Political Philosophy," in *Christians & Politics Beyond the Culture Wars: An Agenda for Engagement* [David P. Gushee, ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 79-80) similarly acknowledges that Evangelicals lack an affirmative political philosophy, which, he laments, results in considerable confusion among Evangelicals.

¹¹ Cf. Stephen Waldron, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Critique of Nationalism," *Political Theology* 15 (2014), 406. Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, vol. III, Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* [G. Harrison, trans.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 406) has argued that only Israel has been called, as a nation, to a national mission. See Waldron, 409-410.

¹² Cf. Charles E. Guteson, *Christians and the Common Good: How Faith Intersects with Public Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 134.

¹³ Cf. Eric Gregory, "The Boldness of Analogy: Civic Virtues and Augustinian Eudaimonism," in *The Authority of the Gospel: Exploration in Moral and Political Theology in Honor of Oliver O'Donovan* (Robert Song

Second, indeed, because the church, as the foyer, as it were, to the Kingdom of God, pursues ultimate matters it finds itself inherently in potential conflict with the state. As the early Baptists recognized, the Christian confession “Jesus is Lord” cannot be reconciled with the demands the state often makes on its citizens – to make war, to finance discrimination with taxes, or to promote national arrogance, are but a few examples. Similarly, the notion of the church universal, with no physical boundaries, transcends, or should transcend, national interests.¹⁴ When it does not, ridiculous situations arise in which combatants on opposite sides of a battle line can both claim to be on the side of the one God.

Third, as a corollary to the first two parameters, it is important to remember that politics is “an instrument of proximate goals, rather than ultimate commitments,”¹⁵ to quote Robin Lovin. Until the full realization of the Kingdom of God, government must continue to demonstrate the maxim that politics is the art of the possible. Until God fully cleanses the world of sin, in the best case, even decent people will sometimes seek first their own self-interests, demand their rights, and concede to others only what they must to avoid excessive conflict. In other cases, when one party has sufficient power, or thinks so, that party will indeed often seek conflict, will seek to win. Healthy politics and good government will balance competing interests in order to lessen conflict; they do not have

and Brent Waters, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 73: “The great temptation of politics is idolatry, thinking you can step out of time by direct reference to God’s purposes or create a science of human nature that makes action transparent to itself.”

¹⁴ Cf. John A. Coleman, “A Limited State and a Vibrant Society: Christianity and Civil Society,” in *Christian Political Ethics* (The Ethikon Series in Comparative Ethics; John A. Coleman, ed.; Princeton: Princeton, 2008), 27-29 (= in *Civil Society and Government* [Nancy L. Rosenbaum and Robert Post, eds.; Princeton: Princeton, 2002], 228-230).

¹⁵ Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995), 160.

the capacity to change human hearts in order to usher in the Kingdom of God – a lesson classical liberal theology learned painfully in the last century.

Fourth, the reference to classical liberal theology suggests a caution concerning the allure of Enlightenment ideals and against confusing them with Christian values.¹⁶ Under scrutiny, many of these Enlightenment notions prove to embody what Augustine referred to as the *libido dominandi*, the desire to control,¹⁷ not the Christian ideals of selfless love or the doctrine of the *imago dei*. Modern liberal democracy, for example, pits interest against interest. The designers of our own democracy, in fact, built it around a system of checks and balances so that centers of power would be able to curtail one another. In its contemporary incarnation, arguably, our democracy is closer to an oligarchy. In any case, it exercises coercive control,¹⁸ not redemptive love.¹⁹ Capitalism depends on the greed of all involved in the free market to achieve competitive balance. Both capitalism and socialism conceive of humanity in terms of competition, either between individuals or economic classes, instead of mutuality.²⁰ The idea of human rights assumes that vulnerable individuals must be protected from others who would overlook their dignity. It does not point primarily to the worth and nobility of human beings, but

¹⁶ Sider has recently offered proposals “Toward an Evangelical Political Philosophy” (79-86) that outline the desired contours of such a philosophy. Four of the first six characteristics he lists – decentralized power (Catholic subsidiarity), democracy, capitalism, and human rights – arguably derive from Enlightenment sensibilities rather than the insights of biblical faith and comport better with these sensibilities than with the dynamics of Christian discipleship.

¹⁷ Michael Banner, “Christianity and Civil Society,” in *Christian Political Ethics* (The Ethikon Series in Comparative Ethics; John A. Coleman, ed.; Princeton: Princeton, 2008), 5 (= in *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* [Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka, eds.; Princeton: Princeton, 2002], 118).

¹⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1984), 156.

¹⁹ “...state-corporate capitalism...is not subordinated to symbol systems that have at their core notions of the common good and the ontological reality of individuals as persons – unique and inviolable” (Ryan LaMothe, “State-Corporate Capitalism, Political Polarization, and a Culture of Unquiet Desperation: A Pastoral Analysis and Responses,” *Pastoral Psychology* 61 [2012], 16).

²⁰ Banner, 11 (= 121).

to the necessity of defending the weak against the strong. Paradoxically, then, the Human Rights movement points to the same human greed, *libido dominandi*, and competition that democracies and free markets rely upon in order to function.

Fifth, Baptists cannot honestly lament the fact that the pluralism and secularity of the modern globalized world have only complicated the negotiations and compromises that take place in the political realm. Instead, we must admit our role in helping to create these phenomena. We had good reasons for doing so, even if we did not foresee *all* the secondary consequences. Baptists have always insisted that the church consists solely of baptized believers; we have always insisted on the individual's right to make that decision freely and on one's own; and we have always insisted that the state has no role to play whatsoever in the matter. Pluralism, including secularism, is more than the inevitable by-product of true religious freedom; it is the substance of it. To quote John Leland:

The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever. ... Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.²¹

While the freedom of Muslim, Buddhist, and atheist citizens in our society may complicate Christian efforts to influence the common weal, Baptists, at least, should celebrate that freedom and their presence as evidence of our historical resistance against the *libido dominandi*.

²¹ John Leland, "A Chronicle of His Time in Virginia," in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland: Including Some Events in His Life* (L.F. Greene, ed.; New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 118.

Sixth, one of the unwanted secondary outcomes of the Baptist insistence on the religious freedom of individuals has been the reinforcement of modernity's valorization of hyper-individualism. In the realm of belief, this hyper-individualism manifests itself in a religion that is "spiritualized, privatized, and inwardized,"²² in believers that withdraw from community, in an other-worldly faith that borders on Gnosticism.²³

Despite these boundaries that limit Christian participation in governing, Christians have solid theological reasons for engaging in government. I will enumerate several.

First, I am not and will not be talking about *partisan politics*. Our subject is much more fundamental. If we define politics very simply as the art of living in community or communities, then the proper starting point may be to ask the theological question, in the words of ethicist Charles Guteson, "How does God intend for us to live together?"²⁴ Unless it is to become "the opiate of the masses" Marx claimed it to be, or, more likely in today's climate, a purely private and personal matter irrelevant to public life, Christian faith must be expressed politically, in this world. The church must reject the "two agent" theory inherent in the "social contract" hypothesis that only the individual and the state decide human affairs.²⁵ The love of neighbor dictates the pursuit of the common good.²⁶ Christians, although not of the world, are still in it; the commission to exercise stewardship still pertains. God calls the Church collectively and its members individually

²² Jason A. Mahn, "Reforming Formation: The Practices of Protestantism in a Secular Age," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40 (2013), 307.

²³ Mahn (307) speaks of "excarnation" and considers it a result of the Reformation: "Protestantism's attempts to ferret out 'papist' idolization of the material world ends up denying the very cornerstone of Christianity: faith in the Incarnate God."

²⁴ Guteson, 13.

²⁵ Max L. Stackhouse, "Christianity, Civil Society, and the State," in *Christian Political Ethics* (The Ethikon Series in Comparative Ethics; John A. Coleman, ed.; Princeton: Princeton, 2008), 55.

²⁶ Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Practicing Faith in Public Life: Beginning with the Local," *Political Theology*, 6 (2013), 775.

to be the salt of the earth, to shine as a light in and unto the world, to be a prophetic voice, to make peace, to love as Christ loved. Unless such love should degenerate into mere sentimentality, it must pursue justice, and that pursuit will involve economics and politics.²⁷

Second, the institutional separation of church and state should not equate with the notion that government lies beyond God's reign. The fact that the protection of all forms of religious expression admits a plurality of voices into the discussion should not mean that Christians should withdraw from the conversation.²⁸ As Miroslav Volf has recently remarked, "Not allowing Christians to speak in their own voices would be tantamount to allowing their understandings of reality to be counted as false, while allowing secular views to be considered true."²⁹ The silence of responsible Christian voices in the political realm contributes to the trivialization of responsible Christianity.³⁰ By responsible Christian voices, I mean voices that respect the plurality of voices in the conversation and that seek influence by virtue of the quality of their arguments and the fidelity of their witness. To remain silent is to abdicate responsibility and opportunity.

Finally, the equation of political with state activity is a faulty assumption.³¹ The modern nation-state is not the only possible form of government, either historically or theoretically.

²⁷ "...though it lies beyond the law in one sense, [love] is still a matter of 'order' and therefore of justice, of 'economics,' and of 'politics'" (John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* [Illuminations: Theory and Religion; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013], 121).

²⁸ "Hauerwas's refusal to reflect on the state... would seem to place government beyond the domain of Christ's kingdom. If, as the New Testament avers, Christ has subjected the 'principalities and power' to his reign, then his kingdom extends over all creation including government, and Christians can and should speak about political power" (Baer, *Recovering*, 9).

²⁹ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 775.

³⁰ Leroy S. Rouner, "Introduction," in *Religion, Politics, and Peace* (L. Rouner, ed.; Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1999), 2.

³¹ Milbank, 122.

Furthermore, government is not the only realm of political activity. Any number of charitable organizations and advocacy groups provide opportunities for Christian engagement in politics defined as the pursuit of communal life in accordance with God's will. From a simply practical standpoint, in fact, it is difficult to envision how the institutional separation of church and state could possibly be maximized to result in a strict separation between Christians and citizens; instead, some citizens are also Christians.³² My concern is to avoid a schizoid situation. I have no expectation of creating a Christian society and no interest in coercing non-Christians into conformity. I certainly do not hope to usher in the Kingdom of God through political activity. I do, however, want to find a framework in which I can be fully Christian *and* fully engaged in shaping the society I share with "Jews, Turks, Pagans and [other] Christians."³³ The desideratum is, as Max Stackhouse states it, "a public theology that points toward that universal righteousness that is likely only to be realized in another life."³⁴

Reinventing the Wheel?

Will it be necessary to develop this theological approach to politics from scratch? Other branches of Christianity have well-defined theologies of government. Perhaps, we can avoid reinventing the wheel.

In a sense, the history of the western world from late antiquity to the Reformation, and in many ways until roughly the last century *is* the history of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and secular authority. As early as his 494 CE letter to Emperor Anastasius,

³² See Karen Guth, "To Change the World: James Davison Hunter's 'Faithful Presence' Meets Political Theologies on the Margins," *Theology Today* 69 (2013), 513-514.

³³ See note 22 above.

³⁴ Stackhouse, 60.

Pope Gelasius asserted that, while two powers rule the world, “the sacred authority of the Popes and the royal power,” the priestly power enjoys preeminence, “because it has to render account for the kings of men themselves at [the Last Judgment].” Gelasius went on to remind Anastasius, that although Emperor, “you must submit yourself faithfully to those who have charge of Divine things, and look to them for the means of your salvation.”³⁵

Five centuries later, citing the *libertas ecclesiae*, Pope Gregory VII and his successors extended the claims of papal supremacy over the crown to include personal jurisdiction over clergy, pilgrims, heretics, students, Muslims, and Jews. They claimed further authority, not just in matters of doctrine and liturgy, but also of patronage, education, charity, inheritance, marriage, oaths, oral promises, and moral crimes.³⁶

Centuries after the Reformation, in his controversial *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), Pope Pius IX condemned as cardinal errors the notions that “it appertains to the civil power to define what are the rights and limits with which the Church may exercise authority,” that “the church has not the power of availing herself of force, or any direct or indirect temporal power,” and that “the Church ought to be separate from the State, and the State from the Church.”³⁷ Pius’ condemnations followed the declaration in *Mirari Vos* (1832) an encyclical issued by Gregory XVI, repeated in *Libertas* (1888) an encyclical issued by Leo XIII, that the state is responsible not only for recognizing Catholicism as true, but also for restricting all false religions, including

³⁵ John Witte, Jr. “Facts and Fictions About the History of Separation of Church and State,” *Journal of Church and State* 48 (2006): 19, citing Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall, eds., *Church and State Through the Centuries: A Collection of Historical Documents With Commentaries* (Newman, Md.: Burnes & Oates, 1954), 10-11.

³⁶ Witte, 20; cf. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 85-119, 165-200; Udo Wolter, “Amt und Officium in mittelalterlichen Quellen vom 13. bis 15. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung (Kan. Ab.)* 105 (1988): 246-80.

³⁷ Errors 19, 24, and 55, Pius IX, *The Papal Syllabus of Errors* (1864), in Phillip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877), 2:213, 217-19, 227.

Protestantism.³⁸ Indeed, during this period of reaction against modernity, the neo-Scholasticist movement in the Catholic Church affirmed political authority, but only if the state officially recognized and supported the Catholic Church,³⁹ a position also known, because of its interest in reintegrating the Catholic Church and the state, as “integralism.”⁴⁰

By Vatican II, religious liberty and pluralism had become so entrenched in the West that the council found it necessary to modify its position, although without substantially altering its philosophy. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the council argued that the state should not violate religious liberty because the modern nation-state did not have the competency to judge correctly. Only if the state acts as the agent of the Catholic Church can it be trusted to act aright.⁴¹ Indeed, the reformer Pope John XXIII, writing on “Christianity and Social Progress” in 1961, decried secularism: “...the most perniciously typical aspect of the modern era consists in the absurd attempt to reconstruct a solid and fruitful temporal order divorced from God, who is, in fact, the only foundation on which it can endure.”⁴²

If the state would only acquiesce, the Roman Catholic Church would welcome a return to the relationship described by Gelasius. Since the state will not, the Church exercises discipline over baptized Catholics. During the 2004 election, for example, several American bishops tried to discipline John Kerry because of his positions on social issues; two dozen said that Catholics

³⁸ Thomas Pink, “Conscience and Coercion,” *First Things* (2012): 45.

³⁹ Thomas J. Bushlack, “The Return of Neo-Scholasticism? Recent Criticism of Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace and Their Significance for Moral Theology, Politics, and Law,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35 (2015): 84.

⁴⁰ Bushlack, 85.

⁴¹ Pink, 45-46.

⁴² Pope John XXIII, ‘*Mater et Magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress) (1961); http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html (accessed February 20, 2016).

who vote for Kerry could not receive communion.⁴³ As recently as 2010, Benedict XVI has reaffirmed the Church's authority to coerce the baptized on matters of conformity to church doctrine.⁴⁴ In sum, the Catholic Church accommodates separation of church and state because political realities dictate that it do so.

Eastern Orthodox churches also have an established concept of church-state relations dating to Byzantine times, *symphonia*.⁴⁵ It holds forth the ideal of Church and state in close cooperation as equals. The Church views the power of the state as a necessary means for achieving the Church's ends in society and, therefore, often makes *quid pro quo* deals with the state.⁴⁶ In the history of Eastern Orthodoxy, several Byzantine emperors (e.g. Justinian I, Heraclius, Constans II) took advantage of the superior power of the state to exert direct influence over spiritual matters, issuing doctrinal statements, deposing bishops, and manipulating church councils. Because the *symphonia* ideal permits the possibility for such ecclesial subservience to the state, scholars sometimes characterize the relationship as *caesaropapism*, the union of state and church with the secular power holding the advantage.

In recent times, the twin dangers inherent in *symphonia*, namely of the nationalization of patriarchates (Greek, Russian, Armenian, Rumanian Orthodoxy) and of ecclesial subservience to the nation-state, have been very much in evidence in the former Soviet Union, especially in the crisis in Ukraine. There, today, Russian Orthodox clergy agitate on behalf of Russian backed

⁴³ Keith Watkins, "The Church as Contrast Society: A Review Essay," *Encounter* 67 (2006): 87.

⁴⁴ Pink, 48.

⁴⁵ Tamara Prosic, "Between Support for the State and its Betrayal: The Contradictions of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Concept of *Symphonia*," *Political Theology* 15 (2014): 180.

⁴⁶ Cyril Hovorun, "The Church in the Bloodlands," *First Things* (2014): 42.

insurgents and Ukrainian Orthodox clergy advocate Ukrainian nationalism. The close identity between church and state overrides harmony in the Body of Christ.⁴⁷

Although it arrived at the position much later than did Orthodoxy, and by an unusual route (Henry VIII), Anglicanism can be categorized as truly *caesaropapist*. Even John Wesley, a founder of Methodism, which was originally a movement within Anglicanism, believed in the divine right of kings as the authority to govern granted by God (not the people, contra Locke, et al).⁴⁸ Wesley believed in the organic unity of crown, church, and people; that is, he held the notion of a *corpus christianum* – one society in which church and state are but aspects, with different functions, united in the king.⁴⁹

The two main wings of the Reformation adopted divergent stances. Building on St. Augustine's delineation of two cities and Pope Gelasius' notion of two swords, Martin Luther developed the theory of the two, quite distinct Kingdoms in which all Christians live: a kingdom in this world and the Kingdom of God. In conformity with Luther's hamartiology, namely that the Fall so marred the *imago dei* that it is virtually impossible for human beings to do good, and with his soteriology, namely that even the effort to do good becomes self-justification through works. In other words, Luther saw the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the earthly/temporal power in chronological terms. The Church concerns itself with the spiritual matters of redemption and salvation, and awaits the eschatological Kingdom of God; the

⁴⁷ Cf. Davor Džalto, "Nationalism, Statism, and Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 57 (2013): 503-523; Hovorun; Kakhaber Kurtanidze, "The Concept of Trinity as Paradigm for the Relationship between Church and State," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 58 (2013): 1-4; Vasilios N. Makrides, "Why are Orthodox Churches Particularly Prone to Nationalization and Even to Nationalism?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 57 (2013): 325-352; and Prosic.

⁴⁸ Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 157.

⁴⁹ Weber, 191, 269.

temporal power, on the other hand, must restrain the sins and crimes of fallen humanity. In Luther's thought, "politics can only deal with a kind of pragmatic disciplining of irremediably perverse wills which together constitute an intrinsically amoral sphere that cannot be breached."⁵⁰ Incidentally, Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism/Christian Pragmatism stands directly in this lineage;⁵¹ for Niebuhr, "Not the pursuit of good, but the restraint of evil is the reason why the Christian enters politics."⁵²

According to Lutheran Two Kingdoms theory, individual Christians find themselves in one of these worlds awaiting the next. As citizens of the contemporary state, therefore, they may not only be justified, but obligated, to pursue the interests of the state in ways that contradict the ideals of the coming Kingdom of God. This bifurcation of the believer is quietist, dualist, and dangerous. It explains how people could be good Lutherans on Sunday and also be good Nazis throughout the week.⁵³

John Calvin and Reformed Christianity consistently derive theology from their fundamental understanding of the Sovereignty of God as expressed in relation to Church and state in the orders of Creation. Somewhat like the Orthodox notion of *symphonia*, Calvin sought the parallel harmonious governance of church and state; God ordained both, although each has unique responsibilities and competencies.⁵⁴ In contrast to Luther's chronological understanding of the relationship between earthly kingdoms and the Kingdom of God, Calvin saw the earthly

⁵⁰ Milbank, 177. Milbank goes on (180) to observe that conservatism seeks to constrain perverse human nature; liberalism seeks to set free to be authentic individuals.

⁵¹ Scott R. Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's The Irony of American History: 'In the battle and above it'* (Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs; Oxford: Oxford, 2013), 38.

⁵² Lovin, 165.

⁵³ J. Mark Beach, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms: Some Critics of the Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 25 (2014), 39.

⁵⁴ John L. Hiemstra, "A Calvinist Case for Tolerant Public Pluralism: The Religious Source of Abraham Kuyper's Public Philosophy," *Religious Studies and Theology* 34 (2015), 61.

kingdom as the precursor to the Kingdom of God, in which the current political order would culminate and find fulfillment.⁵⁵ Calvin sought to instantiate this idea by returning to the Old Testament concept of society as society under God and ordered by covenant.⁵⁶ While, ideally, or perhaps better, in most cases, civil and ecclesial authorities have distinct jurisdictions, Calvin's understanding of the purpose of civil government opened the door to the temptation to use the power of the state coercively. The *libido dominandi* resurfaces regularly in our account. Three citations from Calvin's *Institutes* outline the problem. On the one hand, Calvin argues,

Magistrates are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility, and...[their] sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all" (Calvin, *Institutes* [1977] IV.xx.9)⁵⁷

On the other, Calvin understands this endeavor for safety and peace to include the responsibility, however, to enforce true religion, to "prevent idolatries, blasphemies, etc." (Calvin, *Institutes* [1977] IV.xx.3), even to employ coercive force (Calvin, *Institutes* [1977] IV.xx.9)⁵⁸ Calvin's role in the execution of Michael Servetus for heresy provides an even better example, not in words, but in deeds.⁵⁹

In review, and hopefully not to oversimplify, existing theologies of government occupy a two-by-two matrix. One axis involves the superiority of either the church or the state: ergo, the Church dominates the state (Catholic, Calvinist) or the state dominates the Church (Orthodox, Anglican). The other axis involves the separation of the two

⁵⁵ James W. Skillen, "Christian Faith and Public Policy: A Reformed Perspective," in *Christians & Politics Beyond the Culture Wars: An Agenda for Engagement* (David P. Gushee, ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 48.

⁵⁶ Banner, 8 (= 121).

⁵⁷ Cited by Hiemstra, 62.

⁵⁸ Cited by Hiemstra, 62.

⁵⁹ In all fairness, a variety of Dutch neo-Calvinism associated especially with Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) seeks to cleanse Calvinism of this Constantinian strain because it contradicts the notions of Christian freedom and the freedom of conscience. People must be free to choose for or against Christianity or some particular confession within it. See Hiemstra, 63.

institutions: ergo, the believer exists simultaneously in two distinct realms (Lutheran) or the Church abandons the state to itself (Anabaptist). The pluralistic structure of liberal democracies renders the first two options impracticable, even if one should find either desirable. Of course, as we have seen, Baptists fought against either sort of identification of church and state on ecclesiological grounds. The bifurcation of the believer denies the Lordship of Christ over every aspect of the life of a believer. Withdrawing from the state is also unsatisfactory, largely because it, too, frustrates the Christian pursuit of integrity, of willing one thing.

Toward a Theology of Government

I can summarize everything I have said so far in much simpler terms, starting from the assumptions that politics is the art of living together and that this art necessarily includes issues of social welfare, economic justice, equality – racial, gender, and otherwise. In our branch of Christianity, we often hear one of two contradictory statements. One, the objective and mission of the church is the salvation of souls, not politics. The other, social welfare and social justice issues do not fall within the purview of the state, they are matters for charity and the church – although churches in our orbit do precious little to address such issues. In either case, as is usually true in life, when no one assumes specific responsibility for something, nothing gets done.

In the interests of developing a positive position, as a biblical theologian, my inclination now points me to the Bible. By way of reminder, our investigations into scripture hope to discover answers to a number of questions, including, in no particular order: (1) How do we avoid the dichotomy of the Lutheran Two-Kingdoms approach? (2) What will be the theological foundation or foundations of an approach to citizenship as disciples of Christ? (3) How do we

resist the *libido dominandi*, the urge to dominate? (4) What is the function of government under the kingship of God? Restraint or welfare? (5) Can Christians participate in government at all given its dependence on coercion, for example?

The Bible on Government

At first glance, the Bible seems to offer little assistance, at best, or contradictory pointers, at worst. As to the form of government that best expresses God's will, the Bible remains relatively silent. Apart from the full realization of the Kingdom of God in the Age to Come (Eph 1:20-23), the Bible neither endorses nor promotes a specific political system or form of government. Through a romantic reading of the book of Judges, or at least of the first half of it, one could emphasize the quasi-theocratic nature of Israel's system of judges: when Israel found itself in distress and cried out to its God, God raised up a charismatic leader to deliver. Of course, one of Judges' central assertions involves the fact that Israel continually required this deliverance because it continually reverted to idolatry and diverse transgressions. The refrain that stamps conclusion of the book, which relates the horrendous treatment of scores of nameless women, beginning already with Jephthah's daughter, and the near-eradication of an entire tribe of Israel at the hands of its kinsfolk, attributes this anarchy to, well, anarchy: "In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

Reading the Bible in chronological order, then, one finds the Israelites' request that Samuel anoint/appoint a king over Israel entirely reasonable. Neither Samuel nor God agreed, however. Samuel seems to have felt the request for a king as an aspersion on his judgeship (cf. 1 Sam 8:7; 12:3-6) and God considered it a rejection of divine leadership (1 Sam 8:7). At God's

direction, in any case, Samuel admonished Israel about the tendencies of kings to “take” (1 Sam 8:11-18) and, later, through Samuel, God offered Israel and its new king a typical deuteronomistic choice:

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king. (1Sam 12:14-15, NRSV)

The continuance of the Deuteronomistic History expresses universal condemnation of the Israelite kings for their apostasy both from God and from the house of David. The eternal divine election of the house of David expressed in Nathan’s promise notwithstanding, however, the Deuteronomistic History never settles on a unified and uniform opinion of the Judean monarchy as an institution either. The first king in the Davidic dynasty after its founder violates every prohibition in Deuteronomy’s regulation concerning the monarchy (Deut 17:14-20), acquiring many horses (v 16), many wives (v 17), and great wealth (v 17). Indeed, as though Solomon had been the topic of Samuel’s warnings, in order to execute his ambitious building program, Solomon “took” from the people both material and personal resources, resorting even to a policy of forced labor (Hebr. **כֹּזֵב**, 1 Kgs 4:6; 5:27, 28; 9:15, 21) like that of the Pharaoh (Exod 1:11). Throughout Judah’s history as recorded by the deuteronomists, two Solomons followed every David, for every Josiah there was a Manasseh. By the end of 2 Kings, readers find the exiled king Jehoiachin/Jeconiah/Coniah, still deposed, still under house arrest, but still alive and “eating at the king’s table” until the day of his death. This description permits scholars to find support for either side of the argument concerning whether the Deuteronomistic History holds out hope for the future of the Davidic monarchy.

In fact, except for the brief period of the very flawed Israelite and Judean monarchies, the authors of the Bible wrote as occupied or displaced subjects of foreign empires: the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Hellenistic (Ptolemaic then Seleucid), and the Roman. It was not for them to shape, and certainly not to chose, a form of government. Remarkably, nonetheless, at least until the Maccabees, they were relatively satisfied with accepting this state of affairs as a given. When the Babylonian crisis had yet to reach maturity, Jeremiah referred to Nebuchadnezzar as the servant of YHWH (Jer 25:9) and recommended complete submission to the Babylonian Empire in what some scholars characterize as a policy of *Realpolitik*. After the Babylonians had taken a first group of deportees into exile, Jeremiah wrote them famously recommending that, since their futures would be closely linked to that of Babylon, they should “seek the welfare of the city” (Jer 29:7). After the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple and the so-called “Great Deportation” of thousands into Exile, Jeremiah endorsed and aligned with Gedaliah, appointed by the Babylonians to govern the now-Babylonian province of Judah, but despised by some as a collaborateur.

Especially in the Persian period, however, Jews typically found ways to coexist, as long as they were free to shape their own cult and to practice it. Deutero-Isaiah celebrated Cyrus the Mede, not just as YHWH’s servant, but as YHWH’s messiah. In fact, pursuant to Cyrus’ famed Edict of 539 BCE, a number of returnees to Jerusalem rebuilt the Temple there. Some time later, on the authority of the same Edict, Ezra brought the Torah to Jerusalem. Moreover, Jewish willingness to cooperate with Persian authority extended well beyond religious affairs. Even Davidides were willing to serve as Persian-appointed governors of the province of *Yehud*, as it was known at the time: Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar (?), Hananiah (?). In addition to the biblical Nehemiah, archeological discoveries reveal that non-Davidide, Jewish, Persian-appointed

governors of *Yehud* were the norm during the Persian period (Bagohi, Hezekiah, Hananiah, Jehoezer, Ahzei/Ahiab, and Elnathan).⁶⁰ Some Diaspora Jews even served in imperial government – as long as it did not require them to violate their religious convictions (Daniel, Mordecai, Esther, Meshak, Shadrak, Abednego).

Thus, the Bible does not advocate a particular *system* of government, and certainly not modern liberal democracy. No doubt, many if not all of you expect me to turn now to Israel's prophetic heritage. Micah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, to be sure, issue eloquent and dynamic calls for social justice alongside their calls for covenant loyalty to the God of Israel, but this very covenant context renders their message of little utility for our discussion. Their audiences stood in the covenant tradition and could be expected to respond to its logic. We seek a foundation that can offer theological guidance for activity in a pluralistic society.

The same caveat applies to Judah's royal ideology, the seedling for later Messianism. Psalm 72, perhaps the quintessential expression of this hope, ironically headed "for Solomon," takes the form of a prayer for the just administration of civil society, the prosperity of the natural order, and ultimately, the realization of the promise to Abraham that his descendants will bring blessing to the world order – all to be mediated by the Davidic monarch. Syntactically, the prayer divides into several sections. The first line addresses the deity directly, imploring that the gifts of justice and righteousness be granted the king. The lengthy central section consists of a series of jussive, third person voluntatives, expressing wishes for the king, the natural order, and the world order. Three indicative statements describing the king's just and redemptive acts on behalf of the needy and oppressed interrupt this sequence of jussives. The final pair of lines

⁶⁰ See Mark E. Biddle, "The Redaction of Jeremiah 39-41 [46-48 LXX]: A Prophetic Endorsement of Nehemiah?" *ZAW* 126 (2014): 228-242.

“bless” God, although they do not make explicit reference to the Davidic monarch. In sum, this psalm and others of its genre give voice to an ideal hope, not to a “political program;” significantly, they are not songs of thanksgiving for a wonderful king, but petitions, wishes, and blessings.

Modern pluralistic societies do not occupy a similar stance and cannot be expected, therefore, to submit to calls for covenant fidelity or for allegiance to an ideal Davidic monarch. Another, more fundamental, basis will be necessary.

Blessing and Redemption

To say that the Bible offers little concerning the *how* of government, however, is not to say that biblical theology has nothing at all to say about the essential structure of human society, including the fundamental principles that ought to shape and guide government. The proper starting point, it seems to me, is to ask, “How does God intend for us to live together?”⁶¹ In a real sense, the entire Bible addresses this question, but I will conclude these lectures by arguing that the creation account in Genesis supplies ample, rich source material for a theology of government that avoids the pitfalls of the approaches outlined earlier.

The first element of the creation account with the potential to shape a Christian approach to government is the doctrine of the *imago dei*. In this regard, it is important to distinguish the biblical doctrine from Enlightenment notions of human rights. Rights discourse shares a grammar with capitalism. Just as capitalism assumes the greed of all participants in the marketplace, counting on the greed of one to balance the greed of the other, the concept of human rights assumes the self-interestedness of all participants in society, counting on the self-

⁶¹ Guteson, 13.

interests – the rights – of one to balance the self-interests of the other. Rights discourse assumes the need to establish boundaries between individuals and between individuals and society in order to protect individuals from the inevitable encroachment of others pursuing their own selfish interests. Thus, C. B. MacPherson equates the political doctrine of human rights with what he calls “possessive individualism,” the idea that a human being is free and human by virtue of his or her sole proprietorship of his or her “own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations.”⁶² Therefore, theologically-speaking, the concept of human rights relates primarily to hamartiology, the doctrine of sin, not to the *imago dei* doctrine. The concept of human rights cannot engender a sense of duty to others, interconnection, interdependence, or mutuality. Furthermore, the freedom promised by the notion of human rights has no objective; it offers freedom from encroachment, but provides no indication of the proper use of this freedom; it is anarchic, “non-teleological freedom.”⁶³

In contrast, the *imago dei* doctrine, whether it presupposes a heavenly council or takes the form of Christian Trinitarianism, grounds humanity in the nature of God. The assertion that God created humankind, significantly not an individual human being, in God’s image, blessing humankind with the charge to multiply, mirrors the community of the God-head.⁶⁴ The implications for a theology of government align more closely with the classical idea that politics is “‘natural,’ self-evidently part of human society, or indeed, the most complete expression of human sociality”⁶⁵ than with the focus of the Augustinian-Lutheran tradition on human sinfulness. In creating, God does not act on

⁶² C. B. MacPherson, *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 270 cited in Weber, 346-47.

⁶³ Milbank, 131.

⁶⁴ Banner, 11 (=123).

⁶⁵ Guido de Graff, *Politics in Friendship: A Theological Account* (London: Bloomsberg T&T Clark, 2014), 3.

God's "rights" to protect God's self from encroachment; to the contrary, rather than withdrawing behind boundaries, God's creative act reaches beyond God's self, bringing other wills into existence. In creating, God does not guard God's safety; God becomes more vulnerable.

If politics answers the question of how to live together, God's act of creation can be described as quintessentially political: until God creates, there is no community beyond God to necessitate togetherness. Just as God creates and maintains, caring for and preserving the community of creatures living on earth, human beings, if they are to image God well, cannot merely insist on protecting themselves from others. Instead, in order to image God, they must create community, caring for other creatures, acting not out of pure self-interest.⁶⁶ In order to manifest a "family" relationship with God, human beings must be peacemakers, agents of *shalom* – healthy and vibrant order. This understanding of the *imago dei* in political terms, as Wesleyan political theologian Theodore Weber puts it, "grounds government theologically in the doctrine of God, or more specifically, in the governing relationship of God to the world. Government as disclosed in human nature as political image is *what God does* in ordering, preserving, and developing the creation." Thus, human beings can *image* God, *emulate* God, and act in *analogy* to God in the act of shaping human society.⁶⁷

This foundation for human politics supports much more positive actions than the hamartologically-grounded position that government should function only as a restraint on sin and crime. At the same time, recognizing human sinfulness, it provides criteria for measuring the degree of selfishness tainting human political activity. The "natural,"

⁶⁶ See Weber, 405.

⁶⁷ Weber, 396.

egocentric inclinations of “fallen” human beings can be checked against the character of the creator God.

The biblical account of the creation of humankind in the image of God also establishes the fundamental power structure of human inter-relationship. Male and female alike bear the image of God. Human interrelationship is non-hierarchical; there is no subordination. The continuation of the account complements this portrayal by means of the mandate to exercise dominion. Although it should not seem so to Christians familiar with the Gospel story, with Jesus’ saying contrasting the tyranny of the “rulers of the Gentiles” with servant greatness in the kingdom (Mark 10:42-43 par.), or with the grand Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, the notion of dominion without hierarchy may sound almost paradoxical to many.

A final implication of the *imago dei*, an implication developed further in God’s blessing, also involves the corporate image of humankind.⁶⁸ Not only does this creation suggest something about the complexity of the divine character, but it also suggests that the plurality and diversity of humankind are necessary to express the divine will. Pluralism is not to be overcome, but to be embraced as the rich expression of divine diversity.

Immediately after the narration of the creation of humankind, Genesis reports that God blessed human beings with a two-fold blessing. Commentators often refer to this blessing as a command or a mandate, overlooking the significance of the fact that God’s directive takes the form of a blessing. Indeed, God’s primary method of creation, according to Genesis 1, is blessing. English cannot easily convey the logic of the Hebrew jussive verbs God employs in directing the cosmos to come into existence.

Consequently, English translations find it difficult to make evident their proximity to

⁶⁸ Weber, 171.

blessing. Biblical blessings are not commands, yet they are more than wishes, especially when found on God's lips. A simple rearrangement of the sentence "Let there be light" into "light may be" helps, but still falls short of conveying the Hebrew idea. These divine blessings give permission; they authorize; they empower.⁶⁹ Light began to shine in the primordial darkness because God authorized and empowered light to come into existence; sea creatures came to life because God authorized and empowered the sea to produce them.

In contrast to the divine blessing upon light, the sea, and the dry land, the blessing for humanity is in direct address. Thus, the blessing both enables humanity to execute it and also calls humanity to do so in free response to the blessing, rendering humanity responsible to God.⁷⁰ The blessing grants humanity the *freedom to have a history*.⁷¹ It also points to a central component of the biblical portrayal of God's sovereignty. In the Bible, God rarely acts as though by divine fiat. Instead, God authorizes and empowers entities within creation to cooperate with God. God calls upon the sea to produce living creatures and the dry land to produce vegetation. God appoints a sirocco-wind to vex Jonah, a *qiqqayon* plant to shade him from the sun, and then a cut-worm to return Jonah to his misery. In all this, God authorizes and empowers components of creation to participate in executing God's will in the world. Again, consideration of the political

⁶⁹ Cf. Ryan LaMothe, "A Modest Proposal: A Pastoral Political Theology," *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014), 382.

⁷⁰ Magdalene L. Frettlöh, *Theologie des Segens: Biblische und dogmatische Wahrnehmungen* (3d. ed.; Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1999), 358.

⁷¹ Frettlöh, 363.

implications of the biblical account of the creation of humankind returns to the themes of vulnerability, cooperation, and service.⁷²

The first substantive element of the blessing for humanity authorizes humankind to join animal life in populating the earth. As is true of the *imago dei*, this mandate is not addressed to individuals, but to corporate humankind. Likewise, as implied in the creation of corporate humankind in God's image, the authorization to "fill the earth" (Gen 1:28) anticipates plurality and diversity. In fact, a recent trend in the interpretation of the Tower of Babel episode calls attention to the fact that, not only did the people on the plains of Shinar foolishly attempt to "secure a name for themselves," but they also represented the entire human race at the time, massing together rather than spreading throughout the earth to fill it. Arguably, then, God's decision to confuse their language indicates that God authorized more than the diversity of individual human traits: God blessed humanity in its cultural diversity, as well. The world's plurality of cultures pleases God. From a Trinitarian perspective, humankind best images God when it manifests harmony or "unity-in-difference."⁷³

The second substantive element of the blessing authorizes humankind to order human life within certain boundaries. In other words, through the mandate to "subdue" the world, God left structuring human society to humans; nay, God enjoined it. There is no divinely ordained sanitation system. It is not a sin to drive on the left side of the road, if you are in Britain. God expects such variation, but these differences are *adiaphora* (blue carpet/red carpet), by-products

⁷² "This portrait is not of a God who asserts God's sovereignty through fiat; rather, through self-abdicating condescension to humanity, this God reveals God's sovereignty through love...paradoxically by renouncing God's sovereignty in Jesus Christ." Jacob D. Myers, "God's Sovereign Word: Reading the Theological Foundations of Political Sovereignty," *Political Theology* 14 (2013), 347 summarizing Karl Barth, "The Sovereignty of God's Word and the Decision of Faith," in *God Here and Now* (Paul M. van Buren, trans.; 2nd ed.; New York: Routledge, 2003), 13 ["Die Souveränität des Wortes Gottes und dem Entscheidung des Glaubens," 1939].

⁷³ Waldron, 415 (on von Balthasar).

of humankind's God-given freedom to order its own affairs as long as their efforts do not produce *disorder*. Notably, in this respect, the fertility motif appears in God's blessing on fish and birds; land animals, however, do not receive such a blessing. The omission avoids the impression that humans and land animals must compete for resources.⁷⁴

This omission is consistent with the commission of humanity to exercise dominion over the earth and its animals.⁷⁵ The history of the interpretation of this blessing has perverted it into a curse. Norbert Lohfink has suggested translating *kbsh* "to take possession of" to reflect its etymological origins ("to set foot on" analogous to "to lay one's hand on").⁷⁶ Calling attention to usages in Num 32:22, 29, Klaus Koch suggests the translation "gestalten."⁷⁷ Similarly, Erik Zenger points to usages of *rdh* to denote the activity of a shepherd with the flock.⁷⁸ The Akkadian cognate *redu* means "to command, guide, lead." Since, however, any human cultural activity does some violence and tending flocks may require force to protect weaker animals, Magdalene Frettlöh doubts that the idea of human dominion, a royal metaphor for creatures in God's image, can be entirely freed of violent connotations.⁷⁹ *Nevertheless*, humanity's exercise of dominion is not unrestrained. Genesis 1:29-30 prescribes different foods for the animals and

⁷⁴ So W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (WMANT 17; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), 147 and Udo Rütterswörden, *Dominium Terrae: Studien zur Genese einer alttestamentliche Vorstellung* (BZAW 215; New York: de Gruyter, 1993), 106-107.

⁷⁵ Frettlöh, 359.

⁷⁶ Norbert Lohfink, "Macht euch die *Erde* untertan'?" in id. *Studien zum Pentateuch* (Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände, Altes Testament 4; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 19-21 cited in Frettlöh, 360.

⁷⁷ Koch, 27-28 cited in Frettlöh, 360.

⁷⁸ Erich Zenger, *Gottes Bogen in den Wolken: Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie der priesterschriftlichen Urgeschichte* (Stuttgarter Bibel-Studien 112; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1983), 91; cf. also Lohfink, 22 and Koch, 33.

⁷⁹ Frettlöh, 361.

humanity – to prevent competition.⁸⁰ More importantly, in God's original intention, humanity is meant to be vegetarian. Human beings are to exercise dominion over the world without the shedding of blood!

Redemption or Reversing the Curse

Of course, the biblical story of humankind hastens to the episode involving the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, narrating how the first pair failed fully to trust God and thereby introduced shame and mistrust into the world. Blessing became curse. Now, because of their selfishness, the intended reciprocity and equality between genders gave way to hierarchy and subordination, even to pain in childbirth; now, because of their misuse of the garden, the garden will resist their efforts to manage it, turning wholesome work into toil (Heb. Txt).

When Dr. James Young Simpson introduced chloroform as an anesthetic for use in childbirth in 1847, many prominent clergy objected that it circumvented the curse imposed upon women after the fall (Gen 3:16). Many conservative Christians employed the same argument a generation ago with respect to race relations and others still later to the objectives of feminism and women's rights. As we discussed yesterday, many established Christian theologies of government operate largely on the acceptance of the fallen state of humankind as a fundamental factor. According to them, government functions primarily to protect the innocent from the encroachments of evildoers, to restrain sinners, to enforce the curse. My question asks whether God raised Jesus Christ from the dead in order to enforce the curse or to lift it, restoring mutuality and reciprocity, ending mistrust and shame.

The first three chapters of Genesis tell the story of the creation blessing and human accursedness. The Bible does not end the story there, however. By Genesis 12:1-

⁸⁰ Frettlöh, 361.

3, God has called Abraham and his descendants to be the avenue for returning the blessing to “all the families of the earth,” and the biblical story becomes the tale of redemption. With regard to a theology of government, these observations raise the question of whether such a theology should be rooted in the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of sin, OR the doctrine of redemption as the restoration of blessing.⁸¹

I join Bonhoeffer who argued that just government strains toward redemption⁸² and that blessing is God’s possibility for saving the world, although it requires human mediation.⁸³ People who bless recognize the difference between what God wills and what actually is; by blessing, they promise that God’s will can become and they contradict those who desire the *status quo*. Blessing aims at redemption. The righteous meet injustice and violence, not with hatred and retribution, but with blessing. They can do so only because they have been blessed.⁸⁴

Magdelene Frettlöh, in her wonderful study of the biblical concept of “blessing,” observes that, “Only where human beings appropriate the *dominium terrae* as a blessing – that is, when they understand it, not as an exercise of their own power, but as a mandate empowered by God, when they respect the boundaries established by God, and, as images of God, give structure to God’s dominion as human dominion on earth (without the shedding of blood, and without

⁸¹ The United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1986), 12 cited in Weber, 261.

⁸² Milbank, 233.

⁸³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* (DBWerka 6; Ilse Tödt, Heinz-Eduard Tödt, et al, eds.; Munich: Kaiser, 1992), 134 referenced in Frettlöh, 199.

⁸⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften 4: Auslegungen – Predigten 1933 bis 1944* (Eberhard Bethge, ed.; Munich, Kaiser, 1961), 595-596, referenced in Frettlöh, 199.

hierarchy) – can they prove to be a blessing to the community of creation consisting of all living beings.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

To conclude, this approach to government also holds potential as a framework for Christian/non-Christian dialogue in the realm of the common good since its roots in the creation blessing places it under the heading of “natural revelation” or “natural law.” Protestant theologians, in particular, tend to undervalue the biblical witness to the utility of the wisdom view of the world. Barth’s famous aversion to natural revelation,⁸⁶ although understandable in historical context as a reaction to Nazism’s amalgamation of the Darwinian concept of the “survival of the fittest,” Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, and the pseudo-science of Arianism, is tantamount to a rejection of Proverbs 8, Romans 1, and, in one sense, John 1. Its effects have been lasting, beginning with the almost total silence on Israel’s wisdom traditions in Gerhard von Rad’s magisterial two-volume Old Testament theology. Barth’s concerns were soteriological – what constitutes “saving knowledge” of God? My concerns in these lectures lie with the structure of human society.

Briefly stated, I would like to work backward from Paul’s understanding of a universally available *nomos* (Romans 1), John’s understanding of the divine *logos* active in creation, which in turn picks up on the image of the divine *hokmah* from Proverbs 8, to Amos’s assertion that even those outside the covenant tradition have a concept of what it means to live together. Paul’s discussion of *nomos* in Romans employs the term with at least two connotations: the universally-available law that God incorporated into creation and the specification of the details

⁸⁵ Frettlöh, 363 (my translation).

⁸⁶ See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 334-339.

of this universal in the revealed *Torah*. Thus, he argues, substituting *Torah* for *nomos* when the context seems to require it, “When Gentiles, who do not possess the *Torah*, do instinctively what the *Torah* requires, these, though not having the *Torah*, are a *nomos* to themselves” (Rom 2:14). The prologue to John’s Gospel employs another vocabulary to make essentially the same assertion, with the exception that John boldly identifies the principle of order designed into creation with the to-be-Incarnate Christ: “The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him” (John 1:9-10 RSV). John’s assertion, in turn, manifests a clear line of development back to Proverbs 8, the grand celebration of Lady Wisdom, the personification of principle of order, both physical and moral, which God employed in creation and incorporated into it and which is available to any who seek her.

The book of Amos begins with a series of oracles addressed, first, to Israel’s neighbors. Although Amos does not elaborate a doctrine of “natural revelation,” these oracles would have no rhetorical force apart from the assumption that every human being and every human society has some understanding of basic morality, an understanding available only through the design of the world, and especially of human beings. The sting of Amos 3 for the Samaritan audience comes from the accusation that, although Israel was party to the covenant and knew its *Torah* (3:1-2), the Egyptians and the Assyrians have a better working concept of right and wrong (3:9-10).

God created the world to be rich and diverse. God blessed humankind for mutuality, interrelationship, reciprocity. God granted humankind the freedom, and the responsibility, for shaping its cultures and forging its history. Human misbehavior perverted, and perverts, the blessing into curse. The Church, and its members, can participate in reversing the curse. The

Church can see what should be and cooperate with God to bring it into being. Although the Church and the state are not and cannot be co-terminous – they are not the same thing – Christians can enter into dialogue with a pluralistic culture through a creation/blessing discourse. We can do so as beings in the image of God appealing to other beings in the image of God, making peace not just longing for it. By acknowledging the image of God in all others, we can work within a cultural and religious plurality to call those others to image God more fully, as seen in the best image of God, the model for humanity, Jesus Christ. The institutional dichotomy between Church and state is necessary; the supposed dichotomy between the “spiritual” work of the church and “political” aims is tantamount to a rejection of God’s first blessing and original mandate.