

the good of politics

a biblical, historical, and contemporary introduction

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James W. Skillen
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introduction

Natural disasters are not the only things shaking the earth. The world's political and economic institutions are quaking, and many are crumbling. The Arab Awakening that began in 2011 is changing the face of the Middle East and North Africa. Protests in China, Russia, and dozens of other countries continue on a low burn—low at least for now. Growing numbers of Europeans are skeptical about the future of the European Union and are protesting against their national governments. Many other countries are in turmoil—even civil war—where weak governments are unable to subdue opposing factions. And citizens in the United States are disgusted with Washington's paralysis, caused in part by divisions between those who want the federal government to do more and those who want to shrink it before it does any more harm.

Two decades ago, the end of the Cold War seemed to open the way to greater peace, prosperity, and democracy. Yet that is when degrading poverty in many parts of the world became more visible. That is when the work of radical Islamists broke out into the open, leading to 9/11 and to the long, divisive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. That is when close observers noticed that religion had not gone into hiding as many had predicted it would because of so-called secular progress. Today, talk of religion and politics is all the rage, in part because real struggles of a political-religious nature are raging all around us.

What a time to reexamine Christian engagement in political life! What a time to try to gain a deeper understanding of political society, the responsibilities of citizenship, and the task of government. Regardless of the difficulties that will undoubtedly hamper such a quest, I feel compelled to undertake it and welcome your company on the journey.

Three Basic Questions

In 1789 the first vice president of the United States, John Adams, declared, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human

passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people.”¹ In 2006 author Darryl Hart wrote, “[Christianity] in its classic formulations . . . has very little to say about politics or the ordering of society. . . . [It] has little to say explicitly about the sort of polity in which Americans have been living for the last 230 years.”²

Those contrasting judgments raise three basic questions I want to address in this book. The first is this: What is the relation between politics and its cultural context (including religion and morality)? Second, what is government for and how should its responsibilities be properly exercised? And third, what, if anything, does Christianity have to say about political life and the ordering of society, and what, if any, political responsibility does the Christian faith urge upon those who profess to follow Jesus Christ?

When John Adams made the comment just quoted, he took for granted an Americanized version of Protestant Christianity that he believed was a necessary foundation of the new republic. The kind of government the Constitution established was, in his estimation, incapable of “contending with human passions” if the people did not maintain a strong sense of moral responsibility grounded in the fear of God. If Adams was correct, might we surmise that the instability and weaknesses of American government today are due to a weakening of the moral and religious character of the people?

When Darryl Hart made his comments, he was convinced that Christianity is something “spiritual and eternal . . . [a faith] occupied with a world to come rather than the passing and temporal affairs of this world.”³ If Hart was correct, might we surmise that America’s problems (and perhaps the problems of many other nations in the world) exist because of mistaken attempts by Christians (and people of other faiths) to take political action in the name of their faith?⁴ Which of these judgments is closer to the truth? Is some form of Christianity a necessary foundation of the American republic, such that without it the republic will fail, or is Christianity something spiritual that should be kept at a distance from “the passing and temporal affairs of this world,” whether in the United States or in any other country?

At first hearing, the convictions of Adams and Hart seem at odds with each other. On further reflection, however, we can see that they share something. They both assume politics is separate from cultural life. If citizens do not bring good morality and religion to bear on political life, then, from Adams’s point of view, there is no hope for the endurance of America’s constitutional system. This represents a rather low view of politics. The political system apparently requires something from the outside to keep it honest because its internal operations cannot withstand contending human passions. Hart may hold a different view of politics, but he too believes that any Christian influence on government comes from something transcendent to, and separate from, the political system. Spiritual Christianity should certainly shape the moral behavior of Christians who might, thereby, have a positive influence in public life, but that does not

mean Christianity should be expected to have something to say directly to the work of government.

Where do these views of politics, culture, and religion come from? Are they widely shared by Christians in the United States and elsewhere in the world? What are the grounds for such convictions? And how different are the views of Christians in other parts of the world from the views of American Christians? Insofar as politics, culture, and religion are dimensions of human experience everywhere, and insofar as Christianity is a global religion that makes universal claims, it would be a big mistake to imagine that American practices and controversies can be isolated from those in the rest of the world. Moreover, American life is now so tightly bound up with global developments, it would be foolish to imagine that we can get a clear understanding of Christianity and political responsibility by paying attention only to the American experience.

We know, for example, that Islam is a way of life that recognizes a direct connection between God and every aspect of life, including law and government. Many Christians share this conviction even if they hold a different view of God and God's relation to society and politics. We also know there are Christians and people of other faiths who believe religious faith should be kept at a distance from government and politics. In Egypt, for example, Coptic Christians have rarely challenged the discrimination they experience in their largely Muslim society. "Instead," writes commentator Heba Saleh, "they have retreated behind their church walls and shunned public life, leaving their Pope to negotiate with the state on their behalf. In practice this has meant church support for whoever is in power, against minimal and increasingly frayed guarantees of Christian rights." But young Egyptian Christians now reject some of that passivity, as was evident in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 and 2012. Many young Christians, says Saleh, "are tired of the church's discourse which asks them to stay away from politics and let [the church] speak for them."⁵

We have just gotten started, but it appears that many additional questions follow quickly from the three basic ones I posed at the outset. For example, can politics really be distinguished as a realm separate from culture? Isn't political life simply one of many dimensions of culture? If there is reason to distinguish the two, is the same thing true of business and commerce, science and education? Are they also distinct from culture? If every expression of human life is considered distinct from culture, then what remains of culture? Regardless of how many distinctions and separations we make, the question remains: How are all of these arenas of responsibility related to one another? For they are all expressions of human life.

Perhaps even more problematic for the journey on which we have embarked is how to understand and assess the variety of expressions of Christianity in the United States and around the world today. If it is difficult to understand how culture and politics are related, it is perhaps even more difficult to get a grip on what Christianity is and how Christians ought to conduct their political

lives. American Christians may be conservative or liberal, passive or active, pro-government or antigovernment. Does Christianity support any or all of these?

American religious sociologist Robert Bellah once asked, “Could there be a sense in which the American republic, which has neither an established church nor a classic civil religion, is, after all, a Christian republic, or should I say a biblical republic, in which biblical religion is indeed the civil religion?”⁶ If one answers Bellah’s question in the affirmative, then the distance between Adams and Hart grows even larger. If the answer to Bellah’s question is no, we still need to decide how Christianity should be related to the United States, which is understood to be neither a Christian nor a biblical republic.

In addition to trying to answer those sorts of questions in a descriptive and evaluative way, I have an additional ambition for this book. I want to make judgments about how Christians *should* exercise civic responsibility and why it matters. Arguing for a path of action, however, makes it clear immediately that there is no neutral place to stand above the political fray; there is no way to start from scratch without presumptions and presuppositions. Consequently, I will have to tread carefully as we move along, trying to be as clear and as fair as possible in making arguments, sorting out diverse points of view, and offering recommendations. In the process, I hope the reader will find encouragement to do the same.

From Puritan Church Colony to American Civil Religion

Christianity has seen significant growth in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia during the last half century, even as it has lost adherents and influence in Europe. In the United States there is an expanding array of practices and beliefs within well-known church denominations as well as in newer independent churches. There has also been growth in the number of other religions and spiritualities in the United States. Although the public media typically treat evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Christians as a single large bloc of right-wing conservatives in morals and politics, millions of people affiliated with those groups do not fit that stereotype. Moreover, while American social-gospel Protestants of a more liberal theological stripe have been declining in number and influence since World War II, there has been growth in the influence of African American Protestants and Roman Catholics during the same time period.⁷

Writing from a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. penned his now-famous letter in which he expressed anguish over a view of the church that many black (as well as white) pastors held. King was writing to defend his decision to come to Birmingham to help organize nonviolent acts of civil disobedience in protest against long-standing racial discrimination and government-condoned violence. “I have heard so many ministers say, ‘Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,’ and I have

watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherwordly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.”⁸ That cannot be right, he argued. “There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.” Back then, Christians were not hesitant to enter a town with the good news and suffer the consequences of being mocked, attacked, or jailed. “But they went on with the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven,’ and had to obey God rather than man. . . . They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.”⁹ If that represented extremism, King wrote, then he would join in practicing it.

Was not Jesus an extremist in love—“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice—“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—“I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist—“Here I stand, I can do none other so help me God.” . . . So the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?¹⁰

King’s speeches and actions can be understood only against the backdrop of America’s slave history and its post–Civil War systems of discrimination and violence against African Americans. That history alone raises serious questions about the degree to which America ever was (or is) a “Christian” nation.

King’s questions about Christian “extremism” also reflect a significant peculiarity about our American use of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, in political rhetoric. Many Americans have found such use of the Bible acceptable, while many have not. In the founding era of Puritan New England, almost 150 years before John Adams, and more than 300 years before Martin Luther King Jr., the conviction of early leaders such as John Cotton (1584–1652) was that their “errand into the wilderness” was a God-directed mission, following in the historical line of God’s covenants with Israel through to the coming of Christ and eventually to the settlement of New England. “America, Cotton explained, was the new promised land, reserved by God for His new chosen people as the site for a new heaven and a new earth. . . . All of history is converging upon ‘the cosmic climax of Boston’s founding.’”¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth-century Frenchman famous for his outsider’s assessment of the United States, concluded that “the foundation of New England was something new in the world. Puritanism was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.”¹² From the standpoint of Cotton and Tocqueville, Christianity was indeed intimately intertwined with American culture and politics by combining the biblical idea of a divine covenant with the American nation.

From this we might well conclude that Bellah's earlier question calls for an affirmative answer: America has been shaped so strongly by the faith and political thought of the Puritans that the nation must have been (and perhaps still is) a "biblical republic." But what are the grounds for Cotton's belief, and how would someone in our day who espouses that belief explain the relation of "Christian America" to Christian communities in other parts of the world? Would they say America is the *only* Christian nation or would they say it is the nation that stands at the *center* of God's action in history? Even here at home, how does one account for Christians who do not believe America is a Christian nation?¹³

Much of the inspiration for the Revolution in 1776 came from allusions to God's delivery of Israel from slavery in Egypt, leading them through the wilderness to a new land of promise. By the time of the Revolution, it was no longer only Puritan Calvinists who spoke of their church-led colony as God's new Israel. Americans, whether Christian or not, had begun to use that language to speak about the country as a whole.¹⁴ Later in the nineteenth century, when the federal government could not prevent the outbreak of civil war and North and South became the killing fields of antagonistic Christian-republican crusades, we might imagine that the myth of America as God's new Israel would have fallen into disrepute and been discarded. To the contrary, use of civil-religious language about martyrdom and blood sacrifice intensified as the slaughter became an unjustifiable total war. Horace Bushnell (1802–1876), a leading Protestant pastor and journalist, wrote, "The shed blood of soldiers, North and South, white and black, would stand as the vicarious atonement for the newly realized, organic Christian nation-state." This was not simply a metaphorical atonement in Bushnell's mind, according to historian Harry Stout, "but quite literally a blood sacrifice required by God for sinners North and South if they were to inherit their providential destiny."¹⁵ The Civil War, writes Stout, came to be interpreted as "the crimson baptism of our nationalism, and so it continues to enjoy a mythic transcendence not unlike the significance of the Eucharist for Christian believers. . . . The incarnation of a national American civil religion may have been the final great legacy of the Civil War."¹⁶

Two Different Exodus Stories

As it turned out, however, there was not just one version (or denomination) of the American civil religion that developed before and after the Civil War. Two versions emerged in dialectical tension with each other, but both stories retold Israel's Exodus story in a modern, Americanized way. The first version of the story, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) version, began with the courageous Pilgrims journeying to the new world under God's guidance. Theirs was an exodus from oppressive Britain (Egypt) through the Red Sea of the Atlantic into a new promised land where they were set free to build their city on a hill

as a light to the nations. By the time America as a whole adopted this version of the new-Israel identity, the nation's ideal of freedom was conceived in direct opposition to the British monarchy (Pharaoh); thus, the Declaration of Independence. The 1789 Constitution was written to guard against the possibility of a future Pharaoh (too strong a central government) who might try to snuff out the flame of liberty. The president of the republic was to function as a modest executive, responsible to carry out the legislative decisions of Congress, which the founders tethered carefully to the states. By means of the Constitution, the people granted to the federal government very limited responsibility, namely, the regulation of interstate commerce and defense of the states and the people from foreign aggression. All other powers remained with the people and the states, which were understood to be the real centers of political life. The federal government was to be a servant of the states, not the dominating head of a national political community.

The second exodus story is very different. Slaves created it mostly in song, drawing on the same biblical inspiration that had empowered the WASP story. For the slaves, however, the original promise of America, articulated in the Declaration of Independence, was that all human beings should be free and equal because the creator had endowed them all with the same rights. In this version of the story the Pharaoh, who thwarted the fulfillment of the Declaration's promise, was not a foreign king but America's WASP slaveholders. Moreover, the federal Constitution failed to carry forward that promise because it supported slavery, so the Constitution itself was deficient and in need of revision. An exodus from the oppression of slavery would have to take place within the Egypt of America, opening the way to the liberation of the entire nation. Only then could America become what the Declaration promised: a land of freedom and equality for all. The exodus in this story, quite in contrast to the WASP version, required strong action by the federal government to abolish slavery and eventually to establish equal civil rights for everyone in the *national* polity. As a result of the Civil War and the eventual success of the civil rights movement, the federal government and the US Supreme Court gained a measure of supremacy over the states in education, employment, housing, and many other matters.

In these conflicting versions of America's exodus story, we find not only two different descriptions of the "new Israel" but also differing ideas of freedom. Freedom in the first story meant freedom from Britain, freedom from a strong central government, and freedom for property-owning whites. Freedom in the second story meant freedom from unjust laws and a defective Constitution, leading to equal treatment of all Americans—black, white, red, and any other color—within an all-inclusive national community.¹⁷

One of the greatest American speeches ever delivered was Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream."¹⁸ Fifty years ago (on August 28, 1963), King spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall in Washington, DC, the centennial year of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. King told

the vast audience that his dream was “deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

What is not often noted about King’s speech is the degree to which he kept alive and pushed forward the civil-religious vision of America as God’s chosen nation. Not only did he quote or allude to biblical passages, applying them to America, but the powerful rhetoric of his dream also envisioned America’s nonracist future joined with the kingdom of God in one glorious fulfillment. “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” With this faith, he said, “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” The speech reached its rhythmic, inspirational, and prophetic climax in the ten pulsing repetitions of “let freedom ring” from every town and mountaintop across America. “And when we allow freedom to ring,” he concluded, “we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.’”

The contrast between the WASP and the African American exodus stories exposes an additional weakness in America’s civil-religious nationalism. While the two exodus stories present contrasting visions of God’s “chosen nation” and of who should be included in its first-class membership, they do not tell us much about what the republic’s government should be or what it should do to govern justly. The end of slavery, followed a hundred years later by the constitutional establishment of equal treatment for all citizens, certainly represented positive progress from the standpoint of public justice. Yet those constructive achievements brought change chiefly at the constitutional level by redefining membership (citizenship) in the republic to include people of all races. That change has not by itself, however, clarified the nature and responsibilities of government. We might say that the underlying expectation in both stories is that if membership in the nation is properly identified, then governing will take care of itself. Yet this tells us almost nothing about the specific purpose and limits of government or about the nature of a “political” community—a republic—in contrast to churches, business enterprises, families, and other nonpolitical organizations.

There is yet another matter to add to our agenda. A significant minority of American Christians believes that Christianity is radically incompatible with any version of the American civil religion. Stanley Hauerwas, at Duke University’s divinity school, condemns the myth of Christian America for the reason that it is an enemy of the church and Christian faith. Hauerwas, following John Howard Yoder, believes not only that American nationalism is a danger to the

church but also that liberal democracy itself stands at odds with the Christian way of life. Christians of all colors should be working to build the Christian community, not bending their efforts to sustain the false myth of American new-Israelism and secular liberalism.¹⁹ Despite the critical stance of Christians like Hauerwas, however, a far greater number of Americans, including large numbers of Christians, still take for granted, even if unconsciously, America's civil-religious heritage as essential to America's well-being and as a legitimate companion of their Christian faith. There is little hope for the nation's future, they argue, if it does not recover its traditional (Judeo-Christian) moral and religious commitments. And many of those most worried about America's decline are the ones nurtured on the WASP exodus story and its assumptions about what makes America great.²⁰

Double Separations

The introductory comments above are probably sufficient to suggest some of the difficulties facing us as we venture to think deeply and critically about the meaning of Christian engagement or nonengagement in the political arena. But another closely related matter will also require our attention in the chapters that follow. On one side are those who believe political life is an integral part of human culture, expressing an important dimension of our natural human sociability. That is a minority view in the United States, however. On the other side is the dominant view that politics is not natural; it does not belong to our original created nature; it is not part of culture. Politics and culture belong in different categories.

The idea that politics and culture are categorically different is typically defended by most Protestants on the grounds that government was instituted by God because of sin. Government may be necessary to protect us from dangers to life and property and to punish evildoers, but it is not an expression of what we are by nature. Consequently, many Christians treat the institutions of government with considerable suspicion. Since government has the power to compel by means of force, it can be used in morally indefensible ways. Culture, by contrast, is original to human nature. Culture is family and friendship, music and literature, science and education, industry and commerce, religion and leisure. The latter are expressions of our human nature. It would be best if humans didn't need government at all, but if God ordained it to restrain and punish evil, then it should be kept under tight constitutional control as it carries out its minimal responsibilities.

By curious contrast to this way of talking about government and politics, Americans sound a different note when speaking of their beloved *nation*. The major difference has its roots in the WASP version of the American civil religion. If government and its bureaucracies are held in suspicion and often referred to

as “them” over against “us,” the beloved American nation represents and symbolizes the freedom Americans cherish as central to their identity. Americans laud their nation as exceptional, a light to the world, just as they cherish their individual freedom. America is a city on a hill, the vanguard of democracy, the enemy only of tyrants, totalitarian regimes, and terrorists who threaten human freedom. America, the idealized nation—the beacon of freedom and hope, God’s new Israel—seems to be something quite different from politics and government. Is this because Americans associate the *nation* with their culture of freedom while associating *government* with limits to their freedom? If so, this sounds very much like a theme winding through the WASP exodus story. The African American version of the story does not present such a contrast.

This tension between nation and government is visible to a greater or lesser degree in most American election campaigns. One candidate calls for less government, lower taxes, and more freedom, while another candidate calls for government to act in ways that will enhance the lives of all citizens through greater equality so everyone can enjoy the rights and benefits of freedom. Both sides argue for the greater good of the *nation*, but they disagree about whether *government’s* actions enhance or endanger the nation. The starting point for both sides is free individuals who have inherent rights, but the arguments for government to act or not to act range across a spectrum from “little or no government” at one end to “as much government as necessary” at the other end.

It appears that we have already outlined a sufficiently large agenda for one book and may have raised more questions than we can answer. However, we have not yet said enough to introduce Christianity on its own terms. Biblically speaking, the Christian way of life cannot be reduced to either a supporting role or an opposing role for politics. Christianity must be understood in the context of God’s covenants with Israel that reach their climax, according to the New Testament, in the revelation of Jesus Christ. That revelatory, covenantal drama depends in its entirety on God’s creation of all things. God’s history with Israel leading to Jesus Christ cannot, therefore, be read simply as the lead-up to God’s election of America.

Christianity, we believe, entails a way of life that is not spiritually separate from earthly culture and politics, but neither is it compatible with the American civil-religious way of life. On one side, the element of truth to be found in distinguishing Christianity from political and cultural life is that Christian faith depends on the transcendent creator, judge, and redeemer of all things. On the other side, the element of truth in the view that Christianity and culture are intimately connected is that Christianity is a way of life constituted by following Jesus Christ. And in Christ, everything about us as image bearers of God is caught up into God’s judgment and redemption of creation. Those committed to following Christ enter a way of life characterized by repentance, forgiveness, renewal, and wholehearted service to God and neighbors. Nothing that is part of our human identity can be left out of this way of life. Life in Christ through

the power of the Holy Spirit is spiritual in the sense that every dimension of life in this world is being renewed by the Spirit of Christ, who is carrying the faithful forward through faith and hope to fulfillment in God's kingdom.

With regard to the relation of politics and culture, then, we will try to show why neither amalgamation nor separation is the answer. While it is proper and necessary to distinguish between different kinds of human responsibility, such as family life, education, industry, art, science, and so forth, it is a mistake to pit politics and government (as unnatural) against cultural responsibilities thought to be natural. The element of truth in distinguishing various social, cultural, and political activities is that God has created us with many capabilities and is calling us to exercise diverse kinds of responsibility in disclosing what it means to be created in the image of God. To try to explain everything about humanity from only a political or economic or sexual or logical point of view, therefore, fails to do justice to the full complexity of who we are. At the same time, the element of truth in the conviction that politics is a natural part of human culture is that political life has to do with much more than restraining and punishing evil deeds of public injustice. If humans had not sinned, there would be no need for police forces, criminal courts, and penal systems, but those responsibilities are not the only ones that belong to the government of a political community, and they do not define the original, underlying meaning of political life.

Creator, Creatures, and Christianity

Fundamental to the perspective of this book is the conviction that human beings and everything else that exists are the creation of God. Biblical revelation makes clear that everything begins with God and everything other than God is God's creation. Thus, when we talk about creation, we will be talking about more than the *beginning*. With the author of Hebrews we believe "that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Heb. 11:3). Yet that is just the beginning of what the Bible tells us about creation. We stress this point at the outset because many Christians in churches throughout the world practice Christianity as a religion of sin and salvation: humans are sinners in need of salvation, and Jesus Christ is the savior whom God sent to redeem sinners so they can have eternal life. But who is the Christ that Christians call Savior? And who are the human beings identified as sinners?

Notice how John's Gospel, the letter to the Colossians, and the letter of Hebrews all begin. They start by stating that created reality exists in, through, and for the Son of God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. The good news begins, in other words, by telling us about Christ's mediation of creation. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,

visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:16–17). The Son of God is the one “whom [God] appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe,” the one who sustains “all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:2–3). The biblical story, the good news of Jesus Christ, *begins with creation*, not with sin and the need for salvation.

What, then, about the identity of human beings? Who are the men, women, and children we know to be sinners? According to the Bible, the first thing to be said about humans is not that we are sinners but that we are created in the image of God. We have been made to be like God, made to walk and talk and work with God (Gen. 1:26–27). The image bearer of God is God’s royal steward, God’s vicegerent, with immense responsibility throughout their generations to govern and develop God’s creation. That is the creature who has become a sinner, who has broken trust with the creator, who has turned away from the path of life to follow pathways to destruction. Therefore, we cannot begin to grasp the meaning of sin or God’s judgment or the saving work of Christ if we do not see that humans and all other creatures are created to exhibit God’s glory.

The story of sin is the deep and enduring tragedy that has marked human history, the tragedy to which we are now making our contribution. Sin and degradation are not moral abstractions in a story that floats above earthly realities. If it were not for the mercy and grace of God, human disobedience would lead to the utter ruination of God’s purposes for creation, bringing dishonor to God and destruction and death to everything created. The saving work of Jesus Christ is not a spiritual mystery that floats above the material world in which we live. Nor is it a story that focuses first on the saving of sinners. The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are oriented ultimately to the reconciliation of the creation to God and thereby to the revelation of the glory of God. And it is because of Christ’s reconciling work that sinful human creatures are hearing the good news of redemption, the good news of their restoration to the high calling of being God’s stewards and viceroys of creation. The story of salvation is the story of the creation’s reconciliation, of the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life in this age in anticipation of the fulfillment of all things in the presence of God, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11).

The biblical story is not about the salvation of souls for eternal life, which leaves a vacuum of meaning about life in this age. There is no “secular space” that may legitimately be filled with the worship of golden calves and the pursuit of other (false) gods. Christians must find themselves in the biblical story from start to finish, from top to bottom, if they are to understand and give themselves properly to their cultural and political responsibilities in this age. For Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of all things (Rev. 1:8). He is not a part-time God or a redeemer of the spirit only. Upon his resurrection, Jesus declared to

his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matt. 28:18). The biblical story is not some kind of ancient background noise that fades away when the American story begins. The biblical story catches up the whole of created reality, encompassing all that exists and all that humans will ever be and do. That is why if we are to look carefully at the meaning of *Christian* engagement in the political cultures of our day, we must first find ourselves in the biblical story.

part 1

the biblical drama





God's kingdom coming

The Messianic Promise

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). What a remarkable question! According to Luke, this was the last question ever put to Jesus. It came from the lips of his apostles just before he disappeared before their very eyes. Think of it: these disciples had been with Jesus for several years, including forty days after his death and resurrection, during which time he spoke with them “about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). How could they have any more questions? Surely Jesus had explained everything they needed to know about his mission, the meaning of his death and resurrection, and their responsibilities from that time forward. But no, they were still unclear about Jesus’s relation to Israel and God’s promised kingdom. Jesus had taught them to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). But what exactly were they praying for, and when would God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven?

Some of my Christian friends believe that the disciples misunderstood Jesus up to the very end. Jesus had not come to restore a political kingdom to Israel but to establish the church (a spiritual “kingdom”) and to save souls for eternity. The kingdom that was of concern to Jesus was something quite different from the one Israel had in mind. Apparently, the disciples would have to learn this after Jesus ascended to heaven and the Spirit had come to guide them in their evangelistic work.

Yet that is not the way Jesus responded to his disciples, according to Luke. Jesus did not reject their question as if it were beside the point and irrelevant to his mission. In fact, except for the question of timing, his response encouraged them to keep alive the question about Israel and God’s kingdom. As for timing,

he told them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). But beyond that, the kingdom of God—a real kingdom—was indeed at the heart of everything Jesus preached and did during his life. He was born a son of Israel, he lived as a rabbi and prophet, and his deeds of healing the sick and forgiving sins trumpeted the arrival of Israel’s Messiah and God’s rule on earth.¹

This is what Jesus’s mother prophesied even before he was born. “The Mighty One has done great things,” she sang in celebration. “He has brought down rulers from their thrones / but has lifted up the humble. / He has filled the hungry with good things / but has sent the rich away empty. / He has helped his servant Israel, / remembering to be merciful / to Abraham and his descendants forever, / just as he promised our ancestors” (Luke 1:49, 52–55). And the father of John (the baptizer of Jesus) prophesied with the same joy of hope fulfilled: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David . . . to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:68–69, 72–75).

So, there stood the disciples, a long time after they had first recognized Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, weeks after they had witnessed his death and resurrection, and yet . . . where was the kingdom of God? Why hadn’t Jesus rescued Israel from Rome and brought down Israel’s enemies from their thrones? When would every knee bow before the Messiah of Israel, the king of the earth, to fulfill God’s promises? How much longer would they have to wait?²

With the authority and assurance that always characterized him, Jesus answered by giving them their marching orders. Leave the timing in God’s hands, he told them. Here is what you need to know about me, about Israel, and about the kingdom of God: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And then, suddenly, he was no longer there. Shocked, the disciples froze, unable to digest his words or to ask a follow-up question. But the follow-up came with the appearance of two men dressed in white: “Men of Galilee . . . why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Jesus, with the confident authority of a king whose domain runs to “the ends of the earth,” tells his disciples, who are thinking small (from within the confines of Roman-controlled Israel), that the Spirit of God will come upon them and send them out to Israel and far beyond Israel to proclaim Jesus the king and lord of all. As N. T. Wright says, “Luke stresses that the newly inaugurated kingdom claims as its sacred turf, not a single piece of territory, but the entire globe.”³ That is the message Jesus was asking his disciples to carry; that is what they

were to bear witness to. And no sooner had he disappeared from their sight than messengers appeared in front of them to confirm, from on high, the authority of his message. The one who just ascended into heaven will return in God's good time to put his feet on the earth again, and everyone will then understand (as John saw in a vision on Patmos) how God is fulfilling his promises to Israel: “Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ / and ‘every eye will see him, / even those who pierced him’; / and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn / because of him.’ / So shall it be! Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:7–8). In his vision on Patmos, John heard the seventh angel sound his trumpet, followed by loud voices from heaven: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). After John saw God's final triumph over the beast, he heard the faithful singing the “song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb: ‘Great and marvelous are your deeds, / Lord God Almighty. / Just and true are your ways, / King of the nations. / Who will not fear you, Lord, / and bring glory to your name? / For you alone are holy. / All nations will come / and worship before you, / for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Rev. 15:3–4).

Luke concludes the book of Acts with Paul living in Rome, where he “proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (28:31). The good news about Jesus that Paul and the other apostles were proclaiming, says Wright, “is the news of the kingdom of Israel's god, that is, the message that there is no king but this god. More specifically, it is this Jewish message now crystallized as the news about Jesus, the Messiah, whom Paul announced as *kyrios*, Lord.”⁴ In the end, in other words, everyone and every nation, not just Rome and the enemies of the Jews, will find themselves at (or under) the feet of Christ Jesus, proclaiming God's glory and the righteousness of his deeds.

But what did that mean for the disciples after Jesus ascended to heaven, and what does it mean for us today? If Jesus is the king of kings and not only the head of the church, then what does his ascension and invisible lordship have to do with the governing of modern states and nations? Did the early church answer these questions correctly? Did the Christian emperors of the late Roman Empire and the kings of medieval Europe get it right? What about the rulers of modern states, whether monocratic, aristocratic, democratic, or dictatorial?

Everything under His Feet

The picture that comes to mind most often when one hears the phrase “everything under his feet” is probably the picture of Jesus that John saw in his vision recorded in Revelation, a picture of triumph. The Lamb of God triumphs over sin and all the forces of evil arrayed against God. That is also what Paul described for the Corinthians. The end will come, wrote Paul, when the risen Christ “hands over

the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:24–26). These and several other passages in the New Testament quote or allude to Psalm 110: “The LORD says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ . . . / The Lord is at your right hand; / he will crush kings on the day of his wrath. / He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead / and crushing the rulers of the whole earth. / He will drink from a brook along the way, / and so he will lift up his head” (vv. 1, 5–7).

This picture of retributive judgment, of a crushing triumph over the enemies of God, is not, however, the first and most basic picture the Bible presents when using the words “under his feet.” Recall Psalm 8, which refers to Genesis 1. The psalmist is reveling in the majesty of the Lord, whose glory reaches beyond the heavens. Overawed by that majesty and the wonder of all that God has created, the psalmist asks, “what is mankind that you are mindful of them, / human beings that you care for them?” He answers, “You made them rulers over the works of your hands; / you put everything under their feet” (Ps. 8:4, 6; see Gen. 1:26, 28). This is the psalm the author of Hebrews also quotes (2:6–8). In these passages we hear a positive celebration of the good order of creation, of God putting humans in charge of everything on earth, with no suggestion of divine retribution or of any destruction of enemies. God created humans, in their generations, to govern, develop, and care for the earth. The expression of putting everything under their feet tells us, in those contexts, of the responsibility men and women have been given to rule and develop the nonhuman creatures and, in the process, to cooperate with one another in nurturing and using their own talents. Men and women are royal stewards of the king of creation. This is a picture of the proper order of creation in which everything finds its place and is given its just due. The good order of creation situates humans under God—under God’s feet, on God’s earthly footstool, as Isaiah pictures it (66:1)—with a responsibility to do justice to the nonhuman creatures of the earth placed under their feet. This is not a picture of punishment or the destruction of enemies who have dishonored God and misdirected humans into pathways of death.

For this reason God’s acts of judgment in pulling down evil rulers and putting them under Christ’s feet do not aim to eliminate governments and every other kind of authority in creation but rather to restore and fulfill the good order of creation. Paul makes this clear in the verses that follow the ones quoted above from 1 Corinthians: “Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him [Christ], it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all” (15:27–28). Humans, forgiven of sin and restored to life in Christ, will find their proper place and responsibility once again under God. In other words, the Son’s

act of submission to the Father is not the act of a defeated enemy, cast down by God. Rather, Christ's submission reveals the humility of a servant, and the Father's elevation of the Son to the position of supreme human ruler follows because of that faithful service through which the whole creation is reconciled to God. Explaining 1 Corinthians 15:20–29, Wright says, “This passage, the earliest Christian writing about the kingdom that we possess, retains the essential Jewish framework. Not only in the explicit biblical quotations, but in the entire sequence of thought, the point is that the creator god is completing, through the Messiah, the purpose for which the covenant was constituted, namely, dealing with sin and death, and is thereby restoring creation under the wise rule of the renewed human being.”⁵

Christ's faithfulness unto death and his resurrection to life thus bring together both meanings of “everything under his feet.” God *created* humans to develop, fill, and govern the earth in his service until the work of their generations is completed, and God says, “Well done, good and faithful servants; enter into your reward.” This reflects the good order of creation. However, as the author of Hebrews says, even though the creator put everything under human feet, “at present we do not see everything subject to them” (2:8). The “not yet” is, in part, a consequence of the fact that the generations of the first Adam are still unfolding and have not yet completed their work. But the “not yet” is also due to human sinfulness. In their sin, all the generations of humankind together can never fulfill their vocation because they have turned away from faithful service to God and to one another and have brought disorder to creation. Nevertheless, says the author of Hebrews, human failure to serve faithfully as God’s vicegerents is not the last word in the story. For the author’s very next words are these: “But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9). In other words, the Son of God, in response to humankind’s sinful defection, humbled himself to become one of us and to suffer death for our sake in order to redeem humans, thereby reconciling all things, properly reordered, to God.⁶

You can hear in this passage an echo of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27–28 and Philippians 2:5–11. The Son of God became human and “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:8–10). Jesus Christ is thus doubly honored in glorification. As the One who conquers sin and death, he puts every enemy of God under his feet, subjugating or destroying everything that stands against God’s creation purposes. And through his faithful service, Jesus restores the image bearers of God, male and female, to their rightful place in God’s good creation as royal stewards, under whose feet God originally placed everything.

But Jesus Said His Kingdom Is Not of This World

Even if we can find some basis in the Bible for arguing that earthly governance is part of what it means to be created in the image of God, didn't Jesus say, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36)? Doesn't that mean the kingdom Jesus is establishing is very different from any political order on earth? After all, the very next thing Jesus said was that if his kingdom were of this world, then "my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (v. 36). How, then, is it possible for human political life on earth to find its fulfillment in the kingdom Jesus is establishing "from another place"? Doesn't an earthly political community, by its very nature, include fighting to defend itself? It looks as if there can be no connection between human political systems and the kingdom Jesus is establishing.

Keep in mind that in this passage in John's Gospel, Jesus is standing before the Roman governor of Jewish territory (vv. 28–40). That governor, Pontius Pilate, finds himself in an uncomfortable position because the Jewish authorities have asked him to convict Jesus under Roman law as a criminal against Rome. They say Jesus is misleading people to believe that he is God's chosen Messiah and thus the king of the Jews, something that should worry Rome. Pilate conducts a preliminary hearing of Jesus and concludes, to the contrary, that there is no reason to convict him. But the Jewish authorities are not satisfied with Pilate's preliminary judgment. Under Roman jurisdiction, the Jewish leaders have no right to execute Jesus for a crime against Rome (v. 31). Of course, they are convinced that Jesus has broken laws of their own covenant by making claims about himself that only God can make, and thus they believe he should be put to death for blasphemy. Yet they hope Pilate will deliver the outcome they want by putting Jesus to death for treason against Rome. Pilate is not persuaded, but he goes back to have another conversation with Jesus because he would still like to satisfy the Jewish authorities.

Pilate then asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" If Jesus answers yes, then of course Pilate will have the confession he needs to execute Jesus because a claim of kingship would challenge the rule of Caesar. If Jesus answers no, then he is no threat to Rome, and Pilate can turn him back to the Jews. But Jesus does not answer either yes or no. The answer he gives, that his kingdom is not of this world, is intended to show that his authority and his mission do not fit the categories of either Pilate or the Jewish leaders. Jesus did not come to challenge Rome on its own terms in order to try to take over the land of Israel or even the entire Roman Empire. His mission is not to try to gain control of a territory and hold onto it by force for as long as possible, the way ordinary rulers do. The kingdom that God sent him to establish is indeed different from the kinds of political systems with which we are familiar. But that does not mean the kingdom of God is unrelated to earthly politics. Jesus even says to Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from

above” (John 19:11). In that way, Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of Pilate’s position but does so on God’s terms, not on Rome’s terms. The mission of Jesus is to show both the Roman and the Jewish authorities that it is God alone who holds ultimate authority over them and holds them accountable to the terms of God’s kingdom.

With the Jewish leaders, Jesus has a different kind of disagreement. Their actions show they are willing to cooperate with Rome on Roman terms in order to try to get rid of a prophet who is challenging their authority and, in their eyes, committing blasphemy against God. However, they should not be cooperating with Rome in this way because their law calls them to acknowledge God alone as their supreme Lord. They shouldn’t be asking Pilate to judge a Jew with regard to his faithfulness to God’s covenant with Israel. Jesus has come to tell the Jewish people that God’s kingdom—the kingdom of heaven—is near. From Jesus’s point of view, the Jewish leaders should be listening to him as the authoritative prophet from God, not seeking Rome’s help to keep their own house clean.

The claim of Jesus that offended both the Jewish leaders and Pilate was that his authority came from another place, from God on high, and thus it had something directly to do with both Rome and Jerusalem. Pilate acknowledged no authority higher than the Roman emperor, who claimed to represent God on earth. If Jesus was correct, then he was indeed challenging the foundation of Caesar’s claim to authority. Of course, if Jesus was a fraud or was mistaken in his claim, then he was no threat to Rome. The Jewish authorities believed they represented God, in accord with the covenant. If Jesus was correct, he was trumping their authority by the direct authorization of God.

Here is the crucial point that got Jesus into a fix with both Pilate and the Jewish authorities and led to his crucifixion. If Jesus had been preaching the arrival of a kingdom that had nothing to do with this world, a kingdom removed from “real politics,” then neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities would have been so upset with him. To the contrary, however, the claims that Jesus was making had to do with God’s lordship over all kingdoms *on earth*, over every human authority *in this world*. Jesus presented himself as God’s directly authorized prophet of the kingdom. His actions and words said even more; he was acting as if he were the promised Messiah, the promised Son of Man who had come to inaugurate the divine kingdom. Jesus, therefore, was either deranged and a fraud or his kingdom did pose a threat to everything Rome represented and his kingdom did challenge the position taken by the Jewish authorities.

If we understand the claims of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven in this way, we can see how relevant those claims are to every kind of human responsibility on earth, including human government. Jesus did not teach that his shepherding was “spiritual” and unrelated to life in this world. He did not say that his authority to teach disciples touched only theological matters. He did not teach that the brotherly, sisterly love he was urging his disciples to practice was sacred in contrast to their “secular” family relationships. To the

contrary, the mission of Jesus in announcing the fulfillment of God's purposes with creation was to reconcile and redeem all that is human—all shepherding, schooling, family relationships, economic institutions, and political practices. God's kingdom does not originate in this world, nor is it confined to the life we live as sons and daughters of the first Adam. But that kingdom does have everything to do with human life in this age because our lives here and now have their entire meaning within the order of God's good creation and Christ's fulfillment of it.

Another oft-quoted passage in the New Testament should be mentioned here. It comes in Matthew 22:15–22, where the Pharisees are trying “to trap [Jesus] in his words” (v. 15), so they ask him a question. Much like the passage in John, their question has to do with political authority. The Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is right for Jews to pay the imperial tax to Caesar.⁷ They assume that if he answers yes, they will be able to accuse him of violating Jewish law by legitimating Roman authority. If he says no, then he will be challenging Rome's sovereignty, and they can expose him before the Roman authorities as treasonous. Jesus realizes what is going on and asks for a coin. Then he asks whose image and inscription are on the coin, and they respond that it is Caesar's. Jesus says, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's” (v. 21). Those who are trying to pin him down are left speechless and walk away.

Many Christian circles have understood this response from Jesus to teach the separation of political obligation and obligation to God. Some even say it authorizes the separation of church and state. Caesar gets one thing; God gets something else. What belongs to Caesar doesn't belong to God, and what belongs to God doesn't belong to Caesar. But that distinction does not fit this text. Jesus came to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God anticipated by Israel. For him to say that a political authority should be paid a tax did not conflict with his mission. The apostle Paul would later say much the same thing in his letter to the Roman Christians: “This is . . . why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (13:6–7). Jesus and Paul were not saying that political authority is separate from the realm of God's authority but that governing authorities hold their positions as servants of God. So why did Jesus's comment about the coin leave his questioners speechless?

Look carefully at what Jesus did not say. He did not say that Caesar had a domain of his own separate from God's domain, and, if one paid the tax to Caesar, it had nothing to do with what one owes God. Jesus did not say that God's domain is unrelated to this world. Jesus could assume that those listening to him understood the commandments, and the first commandment is to love God with all of one's heart, with everything that one has, and to serve no other god. Human creatures owe God everything, including their responsibility to pay

taxes to a political authority. Caesar, by comparison, is not owed everything. He is not God. He may legitimately lay claim to a tax payment insofar as he holds a position of public service, but only God is owed everything. Jews knew, for example, that a tithe paid to the priests was an act acknowledging that everything, not just the tithe, belongs to God. Jesus confounded the Pharisees because he was exposing their own confusion about the very law they acknowledged as binding upon them. Give to God what is God's, namely, everything. And under that overall obligation, give what is due to every servant of God—rulers, priests, parents, tax collectors, teachers, prophets, and others.⁸

There is one more thing. The fact that the Pharisees walked away speechless was probably because they realized they had trapped themselves rather than Jesus. In the exchange, his authority was enhanced and theirs diminished. If they had stayed to acknowledge that fact, they would have shown that they owed something to Jesus. If Caesar is owed a tax payment, and God is owed everything, then what did the Pharisees owe the prophetic rabbi standing before them who just spoke the truth with unchallengeable authority? They owed Jesus their ears; they should become his disciples. Better to walk away.

What seems clear from these two biblical passages about the position and claims of Jesus is that he came to inaugurate God's kingdom. He did not come as just another man with ordinary human political aspirations. The kingdom he came to announce by word and deed was the kingdom his Father sent him to inaugurate. He came to do his Father's will, to proclaim and also to embody God's judgment of every authority on earth. Many did not understand his words and actions, which led to his death; but that mystery, too, underlines the truth of Jesus's statement that his kingdom is not from this world but from another place. The kingdom he represents will have no end; it will stand as the last word in response to every human government on earth through all of time. His is the climactic kingship, and it has to do with everything on earth. As Hebrews puts it, God spoke throughout history by many prophets up until now, "but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (1:2). This Omega who is also the Alpha is the one who came to provide purification for sin, after which "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3). According to Paul, he is the one appointed by God to "judge the world with justice," and God "has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

The kingdom of God in Christ is not one among many competing kingdoms fighting for control of territories on earth; it is, instead, the highest court of justice for all nations. And ever since the ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Majesty on high, the only proper response by any nation or person is to repent (Matt. 4:17; Acts 17:30). Repentance in this case means more than apologizing or expressing sorrow for past mistakes; it means turning away from unjust, unloving ways of life to habits of justice. The inauguration of God's kingdom in Christ neither dislodges nor disbands our human political vocation.

To the contrary, it calls us to the obedient exercise of political responsibility. For the political communities and governments of this age, it means turning from practices and institutions of injustice to practices and institutions of justice. That involves complex and sophisticated statecraft, which requires solid training in the discernment of the demands of justice in the realm of public law and administration.

With that said, it is clear that no government on earth may claim to stand in for the resurrected and ascended Christ during the time he is “absent” from the earth. At the time of his ascension, Jesus assured his followers that he would send the comforter, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, to indwell them (John 14:15–21). That same Spirit—the advocate—would also move forward with acts and signs that anticipate the final judgment. The Spirit, Jesus explained, “will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:8–11). The comforter, the advocate, now indwells, moves, nurtures, comforts, assesses, convicts, and judges life on earth on behalf of Christ—as the vicar of Christ—until the Lord’s return. Christ, acting through the Spirit, is head of the church, but his rule extends over all things through the Spirit, including all political authorities and powers (see Col. 1:15–20).

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” Jesus told his disciples after his resurrection from the dead (Matt. 28:18). Of course, not everyone sees or believes in the continuing, patient, merciful governing authority of Christ over the governments and political forces of this age, but that is what Christians profess, by faith, to be true. All of human life in this age, including political life, depends on faith, for we cannot yet see or understand fully what will be established in the end. Faith may be misdirected because of trust in false gods that keep people from grasping the truth about their identity as the image of God and about Christ’s patient and long-suffering lordship. Nevertheless, the supreme authority and rule of Christ over all things is what the Spirit is now proving and what believers are to proclaim by word and deed as they carry out their responsibilities in every sphere of life, including politics and government, until Christ’s kingdom is revealed in its fullness.

Why Was Israel Wrong to Ask for a King?

In 1 Samuel we read the story about Israel asking the prophet Samuel to give them a king. Samuel was displeased by their request, but God said to him, “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them

up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights” (8:7–9). Samuel did what God told him to do and warned the people of the wrongs that a king would commit, but that did not deter them. So God said to Samuel, “Listen to them and give them a king” (8:22).

Some have read this story to say that God opposes monarchy in principle and is probably more in favor of a theocracy or priestocracy, or perhaps a constitutional republic.⁹ Monarchy, from this point of view, is assumed to be a bad form of government since it represents a rejection of God. Consequently, when God told Samuel to give the Israelites a king, God must have done it as a matter of grudging condescension, perhaps as a judgment because of the hardness of their hearts. But reading Samuel’s words in the light of the full range of God’s covenantal dealings with Israel opens up other interpretations. God’s disappointment with Israel, as the text makes clear, was not because of their attraction to kingship compared to some other form (or all forms) of government but because of their failure to recognize and follow the Lord God who was ruling and shepherding them. God had led Israel out of Egypt and covenanted with them in a singular way. What human king could have done that for them? If the children of Israel had been dedicated to God as they should have been, they would have trusted him and accepted the authorities God had given them from the time of Moses and the judges up to Samuel. They would have seen that their unity as a people and their protection from enemies were because of God’s care for them. The Lord was guiding them in a unique way to the Promised Land where they would be established and show what a true kingdom should look like.

Israel’s falling away from full trust in God led God to give them a king. And, indeed, because of their failure of faith, God told Samuel to tell the people what they did not want to hear: they were already in trouble and headed for more. Yet God’s allowance of a king and warning of the negative consequences did not mean that God was imposing an evil institution on them. Instead, it was an allowance that would open the way to a further, historically differentiated disclosure of the creation’s meaning in relation to God. By means of human kingship, when conducted on God’s terms, Israel might learn again to know the Lord as their supreme king and themselves as God’s royal representatives. In other words, since God was their ultimate king, a just king could mirror God’s rule in a way parallel to the way human parents are supposed to mirror God’s parenting care, or the way spousal love reflects the love between the divine bridegroom and his wife, or the way the shepherding of sheep reflects God’s shepherding of Israel.

In essence, that is what Deuteronomy’s kingship law makes clear. It instructs Israel about the kind of king they *should* have. The passage is of such importance for all that follows that I quote it here in full.

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own people. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut. 17:14–20)

In close connection with this passage in Deuteronomy are the kingship psalms, which eloquently depict a righteous king as revelatory of the divine king. When the king governs in a way that shows him to be at one with a righteous people, then together they reveal something about God’s rule among his people, who are made righteous by following the way of the covenant.¹⁰ Both the kingship law in Deuteronomy and the kingship psalms show that the meaning of kingship is not found in the monarch’s dominance over the people but in his service to them in ways appropriate to the office and authority of government. According to Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller, the word “servant” in many of the psalms “is to be associated with two figures, the ruler and the torah lover,” who merge into one. Psalms 15–24 “may be seen as defining proper kingship at the beginning of the Psalter. Obedience to torah and trust in Yahweh’s guidance and deliverance are the way of Israel and the way of kingship.”¹¹ The king is one of the people called to be a servant of God. The king holds a high office of leadership, but his calling is to be exercised in accord with the covenant with God. Thus, there is no room for pretension or a claim of superiority on the part of the person who serves in that office.

King and people can function as one of the communities that reveal something about God because such a community arises from the identity of those created in the image of God. Of course, a king (or any form of government) and the people in political community can become distorted and darkened through faithlessness, injustice, and the practice of oppression, leading to all of the associated evils God warned Israel about through Samuel and the prophets (see 1 Kings 12:1–24). What the psalms make clear in relation to Deuteronomy is what kingship should be and how a royal people can be revelatory of God as a partial and anticipatory disclosure of God’s kingship that will be revealed in its fullness through the coming Messiah.

Conclusion

It was right for the disciples of Jesus to be asking about the kingdom of God and God's promises to Israel. Jesus had revealed himself as the promised Messiah, but the restoration of Israel and the fulfillment of God's kingdom were not yet fully evident. How could Jesus explain that? How much longer would the disciples have to wait? What they were waiting for was not simply God's destruction of their enemies. They were longing for the fulfillment of God's promises to establish shalom—peace, satisfaction, justice, bounty, and dwelling with God in righteousness and joy. The kingdom that Jesus came preaching would mean more than a final day of judgment. Rather than obliterating everything associated with earthly kingship, governance, law, and order, the kingdom of God would establish true justice under the messianic king, who would rule forever. From Abraham to Moses to David, on to the mother of Jesus and Jesus's disciples, the desire of Israel was to see God deliver all the good things only God can deliver. The whole creation has now been placed under Christ's feet, and soon the glory of God will be revealed in its fullness.

Where and how does political life fit under the creating and redeeming authority of Jesus Christ? How does Christ connect earth and heaven, the human and the divine in all of this? These questions lead to the next chapter.