



# The Gospel According to Politics

Or, how the kingdom of God breaks in to the kingdoms of the world

*CLASS 3: Sojourn Among the Nation-States -  
Living Faithfully in a Foreign Politic*



# Review

**Class 1:** God is rescuing our broken politics: preserving us through the state, and renewing us through the church.

**Class 2:** Our primary political obligation is the kingdom of God, lived out in the communal life of the church.  
Challenging to **MANY** of our assumptions.

**Classes 3 & 4:** But we also belong to the nations of the world. How do we sojourn well among the nation-states?  
*Note: Not telling you **WHAT** to think: trying to shape **HOW** we think.*

*Class 3:* Our **posture** toward the state

*Class 4:* Our **positions** on the state's political issues



# Setting the Scene

## Romans 13

Background: Emperor Claudius and the expulsion of the Jews

The re-integration challenge of the Roman church, Nero, and Zealots in Palestine: political issues underneath?

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is **no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.** Consequently, **whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted**, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. **For the one in authority is God's servant for your good.** But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. **They are God's servants**, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for **the authorities are God's servants**, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

**BIG IDEA:** God still has a good purpose for governments, and we as Christians can still see that goodness through the fog.



# The Good of Government

The state is established by God for the preservation of creation by fostering **justice between people**. *Which means???*

## Biblical Hints on Justice & the State

**Gen. 9** - the covenant with Noah: a paradox of how to use the “sword”

“Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed;  
for in the image of God has God made mankind.”

*Religious distinction:* The state not licensed by God to prosecute “crimes against God”

*Religious foundation:* Justice dependent on right understanding of dignity, tied to creation in his image

**Mosaic Law, Psalm 82, Prophetic critiques** - justice expanded, even for the nations

Dehumanization - even while living - inherent in justice

## Seeds of Church’s Theology on Justice & the State

**Augustine** - A state’s conception of public justice is the overlap of her citizens’ private virtue and loves

Justice not separate from loving your neighbor: connected, even if watered down

**Aquinas** - Justice is “Rendering to each one his due”

Different types of justice - justice between individuals vs. distributing common goods. Both require the state.



# The Common Good

**A modern language: Governments should seek to defend and promote “the Common Good”**

The resources of Catholic Social Teaching (CSD) and Neo-Reformed Political Philosophy

**Definition:** “The sum total of the conditions of social life which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” - *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

**The Common Good incorporates several key elements of Biblical thought on the state:**

There is a goal to life: fulfillment of our God-given purpose (Loving God and loving neighbor!)

The state cannot “fulfill:” no salvific statehood here

The state can promote social structures that echo God’s governance, and make space for God’s redemptive intentions

The state is not the sum total of conditions of social life: not the only player (church, family, business, etc.)

The state should serve its people, not itself..

Therefore, **helping a state govern well is loving to our neighbor.**



# The Common Good

## The Common Good affects our physical life

Think Maslow's hierarchy of needs...

People need a certain level of \_\_\_\_\_ to survive and thrive

Safety // Security // Resources

Appropriate for government to facilitate these for all citizens as a foundation for greater fulfillment

*Room for huge debates around the extent government should do this (opportunity vs. actuality, etc.)*

## The Common Good also affects our spiritual life

All politics is religious, in that it reflects a certain view of the human person

People need a certain standard of virtue to survive and thrive

All need preservation of personal dignity, clear responsibilities toward others because of their dignity

Laws and political decisions either...

Burden the soul in the pursuit of loving God and neighbor by creating obstacles

Encourage the soul in the pursuit of loving God and neighbor by training it to respect the good

*Room for huge debates around the extent government should do this*



# The Common Good

What political positions help us pursue the common good?

Have to wait until Class 4!

**The Common Good not an ultimate goal, but a penultimate one**

No society ever achieves the common good consistently or permanently

The kingdom of God breaks in either way, by continuity or by contrast to the state and society

And all nations pass away as a judgment on their injustice and failure in the common good

Even America...



# The American Experiment

The myth of the Christian nation

*Incorrect theologically* - the church is the Christian nation!

*Incorrect historically*

Founding Fathers (and nation) a truly mixed bag: Deism and moralism prevalent, 17% church attendance

“Liberalism” as a political philosophy:

All of Western Civilization runs off the fumes of Christianity: including America

A mix of broadly Christian assumptions with Protestant protests and Enlightenment rationalism

**The Good of American Politics:**

*Respect for created dignity*

Human rights // importance of participation as citizens // Equality before the law

*Respect for fallen depravity*

Separation of powers // laws - not people - establish consistent justice

*Distinction between church and state*

Protected the role of each in God’s politics



# The American Experiment

## The Bad of American Politics

*Failure to follow through on principles*

*A weakening recognition of God's authority*

Rights rooted in a distant, uninvolved deistic God

Legitimacy of government based on consent of the people, not God's authorization or even clear "natural law"

*A weakening recognition of God's goal for society*

Declaration of Independence: "Life, liberty, and the **pursuit of happiness**"

What do I do pursue with my freedom (as given in rights)? Anything beyond myself and my happiness?

A strange silence toward responsibilities in the founding documents

In Founder's day, the assumption of a vaguely Christian ethic made responsibilities "baked in"

No longer the case: only have competing "rights" language left in the public sphere

*A common set of moral responsibilities very difficult to renew in a democracy*

Liberal systems are dependent on the morality of the culture to give them a moral goal: and cultures change

Vague separation of church and state hardened into separation of religion and politics: religion sidelined



# The American Experiment

## Where We Are as a Country

Without a communal goal, we are all grasping for a reason for being together

Our nation's good vs. others? Our individual good vs. others? One people group vs. others?

Watch for this in political ads: what are they saying is the purpose/goal of America?

Without a greater authority, the state becomes the ultimate authority

Therefore, we need the power of the state to have hope that good will come, by our definition.

The result?

Political involvement becomes an **ULTIMATE** pursuit **AGAINST** those with other goals.

## Where are We As a Church: Three Paths

(1) Giving Up On Government

“Just want them to leave me alone.”

Results in apathy or rejection of government altogether: under-appreciates role of state

(2) Grasping for Government

“If we can just get this done politically....we'll be fine.”

Results in idolization of governmental power: over-appreciates role of state



# The Churches' Posture: A Third Way

The church **longs** for the state to thrive in its God-given role of preserving creation by fostering the common good.

Therefore, as part of **loving God** and **loving our neighbor**, we can commit to...

**SERVE** the state  
through persistently **bearing witness**  
to the state's God-given purpose of fostering the common good

*There are many different ways we hold this posture.*



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## SUBMISSION to Government: Bears Witness to the State's Dignity

Romans 13:1-7, 1 Tim. 2:1-4, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13-17

Our default posture: do what the government asks (there are plenty of exceptions...wait for it)

God works through leaders: to refuse to ever see that is to refuse God's authority over us

And even go beyond to do good works

Colorado Springs example

Greek words: Hypotasso (submit) vs. Hypotage (obey)

Only hypotasso is used in government passages: has a voluntary nature

Government duties become offerings of love (to God and neighbor) when given freely

Those who work in government are God's servants, and deserve to be treated with honor and respect

None of this assumes full agreement with government: submission is to dignity of office



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## RESISTANCE to Government: Bears Witness to the State's Depravity

Revelation 13-14 - Roman empire as idolatrous beast

Written during the reign of Domitian, who persecuted Christians

Always a portion of every government's regime, but...

the burden of proof is on the church to prove injustice.

Non-violent resistance

Only kind of resistance evident in New Testament and early church history

Modern examples:

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement

"A Hidden Life" - Terrence Malick, on Franz Jagerstatter

Not just pragmatic: a witness to dignity, which is often what the state is suppressing

Violent resistance?

Depends on your view of whether violence is ever justified. A VERY high biblical bar to cross.

Resistance can be an act of service to the state, and to our neighbors, even if they don't think it is



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## ENGAGING BY SERVING: Bears Witness to the State's Possibilities

The “silent argument” of the New Testament

John the Baptist and apostles never tell soldiers/jailers/tax collectors/etc. to “stop” serving  
But, they do specify actions that would make serving quite culturally difficult

Positive affirmation in the Old Testament

Kings of Israel, court prophets, plus exilic context: Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah, Esther

Political work is a biblical vocation, with...

A fundamental dignity, and

A particular danger



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## ENGAGING BY VOTING: Bears Witness to the State's Possibilities

*The Novelty:* Not necessary for the kingdom of God to advance, if history is any guide.

*The Possibilities:* Using our tiny bit of influence to bear witness to the common good and love our neighbor

*The Dangers:* Using voting as a replacement for a fuller witness

- Easily becomes a cheap replacement of the church's first political calling: her life together!

  - Non-incarnational - a disembodied action at a distance

  - Non-cruciform - a pursuit of power that costs us nothing

- Easily becomes an attempt to leverage power for own interests, not the common good

- Non-distinguishable witness from the world's point of view

  - Conflating Jesus is Lord with \_\_\_\_\_ as President

*The options:*

**Don't vote at all** - not required for faithful political involvement: could even be redemptive for fuller witness

**Vote for a candidate who will certainly lose** - not throwing away your vote, but a witness to dissatisfaction

**Vote for a candidate who could possibly win** - but watch your own soul and your public witness



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## PROCLAIM GOD'S AUTHORITY: Bears Witness to the State's Limitations

Our witness...

Provides reminders of a higher authority that will judge the state

Provides a foundation for our rights: CREATION IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Provides a goal that guides our responsibilities: LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

The Epistle to Diognetus: the church is the "soul" in the body of the state (chapter 6)

*"To sum up all in one word--what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world...The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world...The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians dwell as sojourners in [a] corruptible [world], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens.*

We bear witness to this higher goal in everything we do...

Preaching

Church's Life Together

Taxes

Voting

Conversations

Protests

Running for Office

Social Media

**BIG IDEA: If we are not participating out of a desire to love God and others: we are not ready to participate yet.**



# Elements of the Church's Posture

## Discernment Required

Not always clear where the government crosses lines

Not always clear how we should respond when they do (see: masks, church gatherings, etc.)

## Diversity Valued

Diversity in the church's responses should be welcomed as a full reflection of God's intentions

But we all should be fundamentally FOR the state to fulfill its divine purpose

## Disappointment Inevitable, but Transformation Possible (and One Day Will Be Inevitable!)

*"The church is not the state, but the church bears witness to the state, and sends saints from its formative space to be a leavening organism in the political realm, hoping (against hope) to bend the kingdom of this world towards the kingdom of God." - James K.A. Smith*



# Next Time

What positions (policies & politicians) promote the common good?



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