

THE GOSPEL AND POLITICS: FIVE POSITIONS

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The following paper is a brief and highly schematic outline of five basic positions regarding the relationship between the Gospel and politics. It closely follows H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of worldviews in his Christ and Culture, and James H. Olthuis' parallel discussion in "Must the Church Become Secular?" For purposes of clarity, each of the five positions I have distinguished are also identified in terms of the categories used by Niebuhr and Olthuis. Those by Niebuhr are followed by (RN) and those by Olthuis by (JO). The central issue distinguishing the five positions is their respective answers to the question: what place does politics have in God's redemptive purposes?

Position One: The Gospel Against Politics

"Christ Against Culture" (RN)
"Extreme Right Bank" (JO)

In "The Anabaptist Alternative" (Where Are We Now?), Arthur Gish describes the political views of some of the early Anabaptist groups in Europe. They refused to participate both in government and the military, believing such actions to be compromises of true discipleship (and evoking widespread persecution by governments as a result). Gish quotes one of their early Confessions thus:

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: the government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven...(Where Are We Now? p. 115).

In many ways these sentiments of the early Anabaptists represent one example of a "Gospel Against Politics" position.

According to this view, politics, along with culture in general, belongs to the radically corrupted order of "the world," an order in which Christians have no true home. Active political involvement constitutes a compromise of Christian discipleship since it necessarily involves the Christian in coercion, deception, manipulation and a host of other sins. The state, however, is to be obeyed, except where it explicitly commands a Christian to commit sin or apostasy. God instituted the state after the fall as an "order of preservation" to restrain human sin and preserve society from collapsing into anarchic chaos.

Christians had better devote themselves to the church's

essential mission, the evangelization of sinners out of the world of sin. The effects of Christ's redemption are exclusively confined to the church, which is identified with the Kingdom of God. The world, culture and politics are firmly under the dominion of the Enemy until the return of Christ. The effects of the fall have been so radical on human politics that whatever God may have intended at creation for political and social life is now unrecognizable. The revelational power of creation is thus lost to us. In this view, the fall is the point of departure for Christian political understanding. We only know a fallen creation. Thus, redemption is viewed as liberation not just from the effects of the fall but from creation itself. Redemption amounts to leaving creation behind. God will make a new heavens and earth entirely unlike the original creation. In this sense, all human cultural pursuits are ultimately of no value in terms of the future Kingdom of God.

The answer to our central question is straightforward: human politics has no place in God's redemptive purposes other than that of preserving the world from chaos in order that the Gospel might be preached. Moreover, God uses "good" and "evil" governments alike in God's mysterious providential ordering of political events. The Christian believes that even a tyrannical regime is being controlled by God for God's ultimate purposes of redemption (even if no "short-term" benefits are visible).

Position Two: The Gospel in Tension with Politics

"Christ and Culture in Paradox" (RN)
"Moderate Right Bank" (JO)

Consider the following words of Jacques Ellul, as an example of a position which might be called the "Gospel in tension with politics:"

The fact of living in the world, from which we ought not to escape, is a stumbling-block for our faith. It ought to be so, and so it must remain. We have no right to accustom ourselves to this world, nor to try to hide it from ourselves with Christian illusions. Living in the world we are living in the domain of the Prince of this world, of Satan, and all around us we constantly see the action of this Prince, and the result of the state of sin in which we are all placed without exception, because in spite of all our efforts and our piety we share in the sin of the world....

What does it mean to share in the life of the world like this? First of all, we must consider not only our sins as individuals, but also our sin which is due to the fact that

we are men and women living in the world, and belonging to the world. Henceforth we must give up the idea that we can decrease our sin by our virtues.

We must give up believing that we can 'improve' the world, that at least we can make people better, even if we cannot make them happy. At the same time, if we take this situation of the Christian seriously, we must refuse to further the disintegrating tendency in the world. We must not say to ourselves, 'We can't do anything about it!' To talk like this is to play into the hands of the Prince of this world. Thus we seem caught between two necessities, which nothing can alter: on the one hand it is impossible for us to make this world less sinful; on the other hand it is impossible for us to accept it as it is. If we refuse either the one or the other, we are actually not accepting the situation in which God has placed us. He has sent us into the world and just as we are involved in the tension of sin and of grace, so also we are involved in the tension between these two contradictory demands. It is a very painful, and a very uncomfortable situation, but it is the only position which can be fruitful for the action of the Christian in the world, and for the Christian's life in the world (The Presence of the Kingdom, pp. 16-17).

This second position holds a less negative view of politics and the state, although like Position One it sees the state's function as primarily a restraining one--the state is a post-fall "order of preservation," preventing sin from having its full destructive consequences in the world. Sometimes from this standpoint an opposition is drawn between justice as a standard for "worldly" government and love as the standard for the "spiritual" rule of Christ. Justice and love are seen as belonging to two distinct "orders" of God. Justice is the necessary mode of behaviour in the order of preservation, and in order to be established in a fallen world, it requires legal compulsion, physical coercion and impersonality. Love, by contrast, is the virtue characterizing the "order of redemption." It is the ethic of the Kingdom of God, involving compassion and mercy. It is a personal ethic and, because of the fallenness of human institutions, cannot be expressed politically or structurally. Love defines the higher realm of the kingdom, in which the church functions, while justice keeps order in the lower realm.

Christians find themselves with "a foot in both camps." Unlike model one, rather than totally separating from government and politics, the Christian may legitimately enter politics and should strive to be faithful in that task. But this does not mean introducing the ethic of love into the political realm, where it could lead to more harm than good. Rather it means

fully upholding justice, pursuing it as even-handedly as possible. The Christian politician may, on a personal level, express love, but as a politician, must confine himself or herself to the limited ethic of justice. Justice is thus seen, not as the political expression of love, nor as intrinsically in contrast to love, but rather as a lesser virtue. Justice is ethically inferior to love, just as the order to which it pertains is inferior to the order of redemption.

Cooperation is possible with non-Christians, moreover, since they too can recognize justice as a desirable good. A good measure of consensus is expected, therefore, between Christians and non-Christians in the political arena. Both can appeal to the neutral principle of justice in pursuing different political goals. For the Christian, however, these goals should always be seen as part of the essentially restraining function of government in a fallen world.

One important consequence of this is that there can be no such thing as "Christian Politics" since this would involve the conflation of two orders. A "Christian Politics" would be a contradiction in terms, since it would amount to "coercive love." In this model, Christians find themselves caught up in the compromise of "dual citizenship" and of having to live simultaneously in both "realms." They must seek the Kingdom yet remain in the world: the paradox remains unresolved until Christ returns. But although politics has a certain legitimacy, it is clearly secondary to the church's total mission. Strictly speaking, it does not belong to the church's mission at all. Rather, the individual Christian wearing his or her "secular" cap performs political tasks in the capacity of citizen, but not as a Christian.

As with Position One, redemption also tends to be seen as bringing the fallen creation to an end. Christians are saved out of the world with its fallen order of law, coercion and politics.

Position Three: The Gospel Above Politics

"Christ Above Culture" (RN)
"Moderate Left Bank"(JO)

A third distinct position regarding the relation of the Gospel to politics is illustrated in the following statement by five Roman Catholic Members of Parliament from Quebec, responding to the report "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis" produced by a commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1983.

We assume that the activities of a Christian are distributed on two levels. The first level is that of the spiritual, that is everything which concerns the doctrines of faith, the Gospel, the sacraments, the apostolate, etc. It is the realm of the church itself, as it directly concerns God and the things of God.

The second level of activity is that of the temporal which has to do with the affairs of everyday life, notably economic, social, political and cultural matters--in short, anything relating to earthly life (Globe and Mail. Friday, Feb. 4, 1983).

This approach may also be described as a "dual citizenship" framework. Like Position Two, a "two-realm" view is operative, a higher realm of "grace" and a lower realm of "nature." The realm of nature, however, is not seen as a fallen creation as in model two. Nature, consisting of the physical and human worlds, is viewed as basically good. The effect of the fall was to break humanity's special relationship with God causing people to lose the "image of God," but nature remained essentially unaffected, not in need of redemption. God's grace restores this lost image to humanity: it is an addition to nature, superimposed over it and bringing nature to perfection. Whereas in Position One and Position Two, grace--the order of redemption--brings creation to an end, in this model, grace brings it to completion. Grace elevates nature.

Political life belongs to the natural realm. The state is an order of creation (better: the state is an order of nature) not an order of preservation. God willed it from the beginning. Its necessity springs from the natural sociality of humankind. This position thus holds to a higher view of politics than the "gospel in tension with politics" view and expects the state to bring positive good to society.

Because the realm of nature remains unfallen, the Christian stands basically on the same level as the non-Christian when it comes to political insight. Nature reveals its own laws for political and social life to saint and sinner alike by means of a common reason. As with Position Two, the Christian has a "foot in both camps," although the Christian does not experience this as a tension. One foot is in the secular realm of nature, but not unhappily or reluctantly so, since being natural is simply being human.

The effect of grace upon the natural realm, as we said, is to bring it to perfection. Grace elevates people's moral sensitivities, e.g., engendering a sharper sense of justice in the political realm. Since the agency of grace is the institutional church, this approach tends to lead to a prominent role for

ecclesiastical guidance in political matters, where politics impinges upon the realm of grace. "Grace" issues, such as religious education, the sanctity of life, or the threat of atheistic ideologies such as communism, are likely to attract the church's particular attention.

Nature is in a sense a "stepping stone" towards grace. As part of the natural realm, the state's function is to create and sustain the conditions of natural life which are conducive to people being able to receive grace. Politics, then, is an important human activity: Christians should be as involved here as any other department of natural life. But redemption touches politics only indirectly through the presence of individual believers or the guidance of the church on certain specific issues. Consequently, here again, there can be no distinctly Christian politics, for the same reasons as in Position Two: Christian politics would involve the confusion of two realms which are to be kept distinct, though related. We find, of course, good and bad politics, just and unjust states, but the criterion for judging a good state originates in the realm of nature (except that the state must also protect the rights of the church to exist and carry on its mission). The church sets external limits to the activities of the state. Since non-Christians disagree in this realm, so will Christians. Some might tend towards a liberal, some towards a socialist direction in politics. The practical differences between Position Two and Three may often be slight, for Position Two also requires that Christians form their political judgments according to secular, "lower realm," criteria. Neither position, therefore, creates an impetus towards the formation of a distinctively Christian political mind or communal action.

Position Four: The Gospel Baptizes Politics

"Christ of Culture" (RN)

"Extreme Left Bank" (JO)

One of the criticisms advanced against Christian involvement in politics is that such involvement always means that the Gospel is distorted by one or other secular political dogmas, ideologies, or systems. Many cases of this distortion can be found. Take for instance the phenomenon of "civil religion." Here the Gospel is pressed into giving religious support to a particular nation's political identity, and also justifying its sinful actions. Perhaps the most blatant example of this civil religion today is in South Africa, where in many sections of the Dutch Reformed community the purposes of God are identified with the preservation of white racist civilization. In less acute form the same civil religion was seen when the British used religious arguments to justify their colonial adventures in the nineteenth

century. Mark Hatfield in "Judgment and Repentance" (Where Are We Now?) sees civil religion in contemporary America as a main obstacle to Christian faithfulness in the public realm. Rockne McCarthy writes this about the origins of American civil religion:

The American civil religion comprises not only a civil theology and peoplehood but also key economic, social, political and ecclesiastical institutions which embody, interpret and propagate the religion. For the colonist the Revolution proved conclusively that the new Republic was the primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history. It is not surprising, therefore, that the state emerged as the foremost institution of the civil religion.

This belief was undergirded by the assumption that America and Americans were (pre) destined by a benevolent deity (the biblical God of the Christians or the God of nature of the rationalists) to be freed from England and to spread the gospel of freedom to all people. This understanding is found in the sermons of clergymen as well as the writings of such Deists as John Adams and Jefferson. As early as 1765 Adams penned an entry in his diary which confessed that: "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of humankind all over the earth" (Where Are We Now? pp. 234-5).

This view is still very much alive in certain quarters. For instance, in 1981, Jerry Falwell, leader of moral majority, stated:

God has raised up America in these last days for the cause of world evangelization and for the protection of his people, the Jews. I don't think America has any other right or reason for existence other than these two purposes.... God has blessed America because we have blessed the Jews. God has also blessed America because we have done more for the cause of world evangelization than any other nation" (Interview in Christianity Today, Sept. 4, 1981).

The "Gospel baptizes politics" position can be found both in conservative and radical political movements. Today, some Christians attempt to identify the Kingdom of God with revolutionary liberation movements which have a Marxist vision of life. Whether radical or conservative, however, the particular political ideology which people attempt to justify by the Gospel, is in fact quite contrary to the Gospel.

The first three positions we have discussed all retain a

specific place for the Gospel, even though it may not bite very deeply into the stuff of politics. While a distinctively Christian politics is difficult to formulate on these positions, the positions still embody a distinctively Christian confession. But in this fourth position, the distinctively Christian element is, for all intents and purposes, lost: it is, properly speaking, not a Christian position on politics at all.

What occurs in this approach is that one or another essentially secular view of life, politics and society comes to be "baptized" as the Christian view, whether from the left, right or centre of the political spectrum. Like Positions Two and Three, this model involves an accommodation of the Gospel to secular politics.

The Gospel is not seen as transcending and judging the secular "world" in any meaningful sense, but rather as affirming what is best in it. At its extreme, no Gospel remains. The Christian message merely echoes the world's agenda.

The political consequences here are simple. Christians take their political views (uncritically) from the secular world. God's redemptive work is seen as arising from within human culture. The Kingdom is present in political form in one or another secular movements, and sin is identified with whatever opposes this movement, whether capitalism, colonialism, or communism.

Although Christians tending to this pole still utilize the language of the Scriptures, the message of the Scriptures is effectively silenced: another gospel is being preached. The Christian mission is to "read off" where God is at work in the world. Unfortunately, though predictably, different Christians "read off" different divine messages in the world. It is important to stress here that this position does not simply view these secular ideologies as appropriate for the "lower realm," whether nature or the "order of preservation." Rather such ideologies implicitly become the expression of the Gospel itself. Although the language of the two realms may remain, it is the world that has defined what the Gospel should look like, not the reverse.

Standing at the opposite end of the spectrum to Position One (which accentuates the fall and neglects creation), this view forgets that the fall touches everyone everywhere, not just one's political opponents. Because it is therefore blind to its own sinful tendencies, it cannot bring a genuine Christian critique to bear on political life. Politics remains effectively untouched by the transforming power of the Gospel.

Position Five: The Gospel Transforms Politics

"Christ the Transformer of Culture" (RN)

"The Biblical Witness" (JO)

Our final position brings together what seems to be the most consistently biblical teaching on the meaning and relation of creation, fall, redemption and the Kingdom of God. It combines an affirmation of the value of political life with a search for a distinctively Christian perspective. In this view political life is seen as being rooted in the created structures for human community (delimiting it from Positions One and Two). Further, it seeks to recognize the deeply corrupting effects of sin on political life as we experience it in a fallen world (distinguishing it from Positions Three and Four). Further, Christ's redemption is seen as embracing all aspects of human culture, including government and politics. Over against Position One, this view sees creation as the "theatre of God's glory." God continually upholds and reveals his will through creation in spite of the distorting effects of the fall. The fall has perverted, though by no means obliterated, creational revelation. Thus we can still recognize, through the eyes of the Gospel, something of the shape of a political life that is in accordance with God's original will for human life.

The purpose of redemption is seen as the ultimate restoration of the fallen creation. Redemption does not leave creation behind; rather it purges it of evil and transforms it into the Kingdom of God. Since redemption reaches all of creation, Christians should seek a Christian politics, one motivated and directed by the redemptive purposes of God. This will not be a politics totally alien to non-Christians, since they inhabit the same creation. But in its essential foundation it will be quite distinct from other political perspectives. Its practical outworking, though converging at possibly many particular points with those of other views, will manifest a different overall shape.

In contrast to Positions Two, Three and Four, this view believes that Christians should not borrow their basic political convictions from alternative visions of life, nor seek a synthesis of Christian and other elements, but rather develop a biblically inspired framework out of which to do politics.

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