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CHAPTER ONE

Religion and Politics: Friends or Enemies?

In the course of our common pilgrimage of faith, one of the many things we discover is that the Scriptures can be difficult to reconcile. At times, different verses and injunctions seem to make different claims and to demand different and sometimes even contradictory responses.

For example, Jesus tells us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” And yet, five chapters later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

In the book of Romans we learn that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” even as we are called to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us to honor our fathers and mothers, and St. Paul instructs husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church—yet Jesus declares, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his

wife and children, . . . he cannot be my disciple.”

Are these and other verses truly irreconcilable? No; but reconciling them requires careful study and reflection. It can be dangerous, or even heretical, to build whole doctrines on a single verse without taking into account other verses and, especially, the historical context.

What is true about the Bible’s prescriptions in general is true in particular for its teachings on Christian involvement in politics and governance. On one side we are told that Jesus is Lord of everything. According to the Christian account of things, God has never been detached from the affairs of this world; to the contrary, He has played an intimate role in its unfolding drama—from the creation, to the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, to the incarnational presence of Jesus. God, the Bible teaches, is the author of history, and is not indifferent to the realm of politics and history.

So it would be foolish to exclude politics from the things over which God has authority, especially since civil government was itself established by God. Of the hundreds of prohibitions in the sixty-six books of the Bible, none is against people of faith serving in government.

We can put the point much more positively than that. In the Hebrew Bible, certain kings win the outright approval of God. In the New Testament, St. Paul argues that Christians should be good citizens and faithfully discharge their obligations to the state. Jesus Himself says we should render unto God the things that are God’s and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

Still more positively, Christians should *care* about politics. The reason is that political acts have profound human consequences. It makes a very great difference whether people live in freedom or servitude; whether government promotes a culture of life or a culture of death; whether the state is a guardian or an enemy of human dignity. And whatever form of government we live under, we as individuals are enjoined to be mindful of our own civic du-

ties. The prophet Micah tells us to do justice and to love mercy. We are called to oppose evil, to see to the needs of “the least of these,” to comfort the afflicted, to feed the hungry, to help free the captives.

But doesn't the Bible also clearly teach that some things are far more *important* than politics? It does. Before the time of Jesus, it was expected that the Messiah would come as a political leader. Instead, He came as a lowly servant, born not to noble privilege but in a manger in Bethlehem. The disciples recruited by Jesus did not enjoy worldly status or influence. On a high mountain in the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus by offering Him the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He declined, emphatically.

Jesus and His disciples also demonstrated a profound mistrust of power—especially political power. The focal point of Christ's ministry—the objects of most of His energies and affections—were the downtrodden, the social outcasts, the powerless. Regarding a Christian's place in the world, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” None of the disciples led anything approaching what we would consider a political movement, and all of us are urged to be “strangers and pilgrims” in the City of Man. Finally, there is Christianity's most sacred symbol, the cross—an emblem of agony and humiliation that is the antithesis of worldly power and victory.

History, especially the history of the church, may seem to offer its own reasons for demarcating Christianity from the sphere of politics. According to the social philosopher Jacques Ellul, every time the church has gotten into the political game, it has been drawn into self-betrayal or apostasy. “Politics is the Church's worst problem,” Ellul wrote. “It is her constant temptation, the occasion of her greatest disasters, the trap continually set for her by the Prince of this World.”¹

Given these cross currents, it is little wonder that throughout history Christians have adopted fundamentally different, and even diametrically opposed, approaches to politics and governing.

The Anabaptist tradition—which grew out of the Reformation and now includes the Amish, Mennonites, and Plymouth Brethren movements—takes the view that Christian allegiance should be to the kingdom of God alone. If politics demands deep involvement in this world, holiness involves separation from it. For some Anabaptists, the duties of a Christian are restricted to praying for those in political authority, paying taxes, and passively obeying the civilian government. Others focus more on the example of the church itself as an alternative society. “The first task of Christian social ethics,” writes Duke University’s Stanley Hauerwas, “is not to make the ‘world’ better or more just, but to help Christian people form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence.”²

At the other end of the spectrum are figures who have wanted the church to govern earthly affairs, so as to bring society better into line with their understanding of God’s will. This view goes back at least to the Roman Emperor Constantine, who in the fourth century first granted Christians freedom of worship, along with political privilege. Under his rule, Christian bishops functioned in an official political capacity, and the power of the state was used to enforce doctrine. In the course of a century or so, the position of Christians in Rome went “from the church against the state to the church for the state.”³

Pope Innocent III, who lived in the thirteenth century, viewed himself not simply as a spiritual leader but as a temporal ruler—and he proved it by seizing authority away from the secular government. During his reign, the papacy was at the height of its power; it was, in effect, a theocratic superstate. In more recent times we have the model of the Church of England, the officially established church of the realm, and one that believes it has an affirmative duty to shape society. In fact, the bishops of the Anglican Church of England sit in the House of Lords, where they are called “the Lords Spiritual.”

Between these two poles one finds thinkers such as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, and, approaching our own times, Abraham Kuyper, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

St. Augustine ranks as arguably the most influential Christian thinker after St. Paul, and his book *The City of God* may be the most influential Christian work of the Middle Ages. In addition to its many other significant achievements, this book created what has rightly been called a “theology of history.”

It is to Augustine that we owe the concepts of the City of God and the City of Man—the former anchored in “heavenly hopes,” the latter in “worldly possession.” Tracing the history of these two cities, Augustine concludes that, ultimately, the City of God will triumph. Until then, however, we live in the City of Man, the result of the fall and of a defect in the human will.

For Augustine, the purpose of the state is to restrain evil and to advance justice, for, “in the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organized brigandage?”⁴ But such justice can only approach true—divine—justice insofar as it is informed by the “heavenly hopes” that flow from the City of God. As the theologian Robert E. Webber comments,

[T]rue justice exists only in the society of God, and this will be truly fulfilled only after the Judgment. Nevertheless, while no society on earth can fully express this justice, the one that is more influenced by Christians and Christian teaching will more perfectly reflect a just society. For this reason, Christians have a duty toward government.⁵

Martin Luther (1483–1546) propounded a different vision: two kingdoms, one carnal and the other spiritual, each needing to remain separate from the other and each making its own legitimate demands. Still, Luther’s views, while somewhat dualistic and quietist, did not advocate withdrawal from the world or preclude Christian participation in political affairs. We need both kingdoms, Luther maintained, “the one to produce righteousness, the other

to bring about eternal peace and prevent evil deeds.”⁶

To John Calvin (1509–1564), God was not only Lord and Creator but “a Governor and Preserver, . . . sustaining, cherishing, superintending all the things which He has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow.”⁷ The sovereignty of God, in other words, extends to *all* spheres, including all human institutions. The active purpose of the state, Calvin wrote, is “to foster and maintain the external worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the condition of the church, to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to reconcile us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility.” Beyond providing merely for peace and safety, civil authorities, according to Calvin, are the “ordained guardians and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, honor, and tranquility.”⁸

The nineteenth-century Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper struck a somewhat more moderate note. Arguing for “sphere sovereignty,” he saw three spheres—the Church, the State, and Society—each distinct but interrelated with the others, all part of the created order, all governed by God. “Instead of monastic flight from the world,” Kuyper wrote, “the duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position of life.”⁹

Like Kuyper, the twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth also took a relatively benign view of the state, believing that it, like the church, served Christ’s divine purposes beyond simply restraining evil. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most influential twentieth-century articulators of the church-state relationship, believed in the necessity of politics in the struggle for social justice, even as he understood the sobering limitations of politics in this fallen world.

As we have seen, in historical experience, one can discern an ever-swinging pendulum of political engagement. Consider, in modern times, a single American denomination—the Baptists. For a long period, many Baptists were led by their dispensational theology to concentrate on winning souls instead of engaging the

world. But it was also from within their ranks that ministers and activists like Jerry Falwell would emerge to argue for restoring America's "moral sanity" as an urgent Christian imperative. "Conservative Fundamentalists and Evangelicals can be used of God to bring about a great revival of true Christianity in America and the world in our lifetime," Falwell wrote in 1981.¹⁰ This is a story we will return to.

STATECRAFT AS SOULCRAFT

What, then, are the views and insights we ourselves bring to this matter? How do we think Christians should approach matters of politics and governing?

To begin with, we reject the notion that Christianity and politics are at odds or irreconcilable. This is a form of Christian privatism. It has more in common with the ancient Gnostic view that creation is inherently evil than it does with the injunctions and teachings of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

As all human activity—from the mundane to the profound, from personal lives to professional careers—falls under God's domain, so authentic Christian faith should be relevant to the whole of life; it ought not to be segregated from worldly affairs. "All our merely natural activities will be accepted," C. S. Lewis said, "if they are offered to God, even the humblest, and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not. Christianity does not simply replace our natural life and substitute a new one; it is rather a new organisation which exploits, to its own supernatural end, these natural materials."¹¹

We readily stipulate that, according to Christian teaching, the main purposes God wants to advance are non-political. As we saw earlier, the New Testament itself contains very little discussion of politics, and no obvious political philosophy. Christianity's core concerns have to do with soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) and eschatology (the doctrine of final things such as death and the

last judgment), with the cultivation of personal virtues, and with the rules that ought to govern the behavior of individuals and the community of believers.

But God also cares about justice. And as Augustine wrote, politics can be a means through which justice—“the end of government” in the words of James Madison—is either advanced or impeded. Does this mean that the church is wrong to model itself as an alternative to this world? Not at all. But that model should not be understood as counseling subordination or powerlessness in the face of evil.

The sociologist James Davison Hunter grapples with the possibilities of political engagement in his book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. In speaking about his book, Hunter has raised a number of questions about how much we can expect politics to accomplish.

What the state can't do is provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society. There are no comprehensive political solutions to the deterioration of family values, the desire for equity, or the challenge of achieving consensus and solidarity in a cultural context of fragmentation and polarization. There are no real political solutions to the absence of decency, or to the spread of vulgarity.¹²

Hunter concedes that laws “do reflect values.” But, he insists, laws “cannot generate values or instill values, or settle the conflict over values.”¹³ Therefore, he urges Christians to be “silent for a season” and “learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization.”¹⁴

Hunter is a thoughtful and fair-minded analyst, and measured in his conclusions. But he imputes too little influence to the state and the political process. They are more important than he thinks.

“A polity is a river of constantly changing composition,” George Will wrote in *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, “and the river’s banks are built of laws.”¹⁵ The laws of a nation embody its values and shape them, in ways large and small, obvious and subtle, direct and indirect, sometimes immediately and often lasting. The most obvious examples from our own history concern slavery and segregation, but there are plenty of others, from welfare to education, from crime to drug use, to Supreme Court decisions like *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, and *Roe v. Wade*.

Laws express moral beliefs and judgments. Like throwing a pebble into a pond, the waves ripple outward. They tell citizens what our society ought to value and condemn, what is worthy of our esteem and what merits our disapprobation. They both ratify and stigmatize. That is not all that laws do, but it is among the most important things they do.

Suppose that, next year, all fifty states decide to legalize marijuana and cocaine use, prostitution and same-sex marriage. Regardless of where you stand on the issues, do you doubt that, if such laws stayed in effect for fifty years, they wouldn’t fundamentally alter our views, including our moral views, of these issues? The welfare laws that passed in the 1960s helped create a culture of dependency among the underclass—and the passage of welfare reform in 1996 started to reverse it. Rudy Giuliani’s policies in the 1990s helped transform New York, not only making it a far safer city, but radically improving its spirit and ethos.

Hunter is right that neither politics nor the state can “provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society.” *Nothing* can provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society. The question is the degree to which perennial human problems can be ameliorated, and attitudes and habits thereby improved. A civilized society takes that task seriously. The work is done in our nation by many different institutions, from the family to school, from houses of worship to Hollywood, from

professional sports to the military. Each has a role to play, and so does the state. Indeed, the state can have, for good or ill, a major influence on the others.

Politics and governing is fraught with temptations and dangers. There are plenty of people who bring dishonor to the enterprise. But there is also something ennobling about it when done properly. We cannot neglect the importance of our laws because we cannot neglect their influence on our moral lives. Such are the duties of citizenship in a free society.

FIVE GUIDING PRECEPTS

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” are the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Orthodox Christianity has never held that, before His return, God’s kingdom will reign here on earth. The most just political regime is incomplete and imperfect compared with what is to come. But there are degrees of incomplete and imperfect, and these carry significant consequences; to acknowledge the limitations of an earthly kingdom cannot be an excuse for passivity. Political regimes fall on a continuum, and it matters a great deal if a regime is closer to establishing a thriving democracy than to establishing a tyranny.

True, Christian engagement with politics has its own potential drawbacks, among them a discrediting of the institutional church and its basic purposes, which continue to be salvific and personal in nature. In the quest to find the right balance, there is a need for guiding precepts to help shape our thinking and actions. We offer five.

Moral Duties

First, the moral duties placed on individuals are, in important respects, different from the ones placed on the state. The Sermon on the Mount presents profound moral teachings that ought to guide the lives of individual Christians; but it was not intended to be the

basis for a political philosophy or a model of how the state ought to act.

The reason is fairly obvious: the state has powers and responsibilities that are different from, and sometimes denied to, individuals. The Bible in Romans 13 makes it clear that, for Christians and non-Christians alike, government is divinely sanctioned by God to preserve public order. But if we were simplistically to apply the standards of the individual to the practices of the state, we would end up arguing that, because individuals are called to “turn the other cheek,” the state should do the same—thereby making the criminal-justice system unworkable and invasions by foreign powers inevitable. Because we must not murder, should a nation never, under any circumstances, go to war?

Collapsing this distinction represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of government, which has invested in it powers of life, death, and coercion denied to individuals. These are powers that unfortunately are too often abused; sorting through matters of war and peace involves difficult moral choices, as we ourselves experienced during our White House years. Yet the same powers can be used to defend innocent lives and establish social order. They can also create the conditions that allow the church to exist, Christians to minister, and good works to be done. This is the reason why the callings of soldier, policeman, and president are not just permissible for Christians, but honorable.

We speak as two who have worked as representatives of the state during times of crisis and deadly attack. We were serving in the Bush White House on September 11, 2001. The day began quietly enough. One of us (Wehner) attended the 7:30 a.m. senior staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room and sent the other (Gerson) an e-mail at 8:41 a.m. Eastern time. “Very little of note happened. The economy dominated the discussions, but little new was said. Senior staff should plan to attend at least some of tonight’s congressional barbecue.”

At 8:46 a.m., American Airlines Flight 11 flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Seventeen minutes later, at 9:03 a.m., came the second strike, when United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower.

America was at war.

That event underscored for us, in a way nothing else really could, that we had obligations not as individuals but as public servants. We had a solemn duty to protect those whom we had taken an oath to defend, and we took it seriously. What had been an abstract debate for us was suddenly very real.

Three days later, with thousands of Americans dead and many thousands more stricken with grief, President Bush spoke at the National Cathedral. "We are here in the middle hour of our grief," he began.

So many have suffered so great a loss, and today we express our nation's sorrow. We come before God to pray for the missing and the dead, and for those who loved them. . . . Now come the names, the list of casualties we are only beginning to read. They are the names of men and women who began their day at a desk or in an airport, busy with life. They are the names of people who faced death and in their last moments called home to say, be brave, and I love you. . . . To the children and parents and spouses and families and friends of the lost, we offer the deepest sympathy of the nation.

One of the responsibilities of the president is to speak to the nation in times of grief and sorrow. George W. Bush did that on September 14, with remarkable poise and grace. His words helped to bind together a nation that was still in shock. Yet at that moment he resolved, as did we, that we would do all we could to prevent another attack, another massacre, another event commemorating the dead. We did not want the president to once again have to offer the deepest sympathy of the nation to the children and parents and spouses and families and friends of the lost.

We were not in a mood to turn the other cheek; and we did not feel then, and we do not feel now, that this violated our consciences as Christians.

The Institutional Church and Individual Christians

Second, the institutional church has roles and responsibilities distinct from those of individual Christians.

In a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, published an article titled, “Carl Henry Was Right.”¹⁶ It seems that, back in the late 1960s, Mouw, then a PhD student in philosophy, had submitted an essay describing his alienation from evangelicalism because of what he viewed as its failure to properly address issues raised by the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War. “As a corrective,” Mouw says, “I wanted the church, *as church*, to acknowledge its obligation to speak to such matters.”

Carl Henry, then the magazine’s editor, liked the essay but wanted one important revision: the church, he said, should regularly articulate *general* principles bearing on social concerns, while leaving it to individuals to apply those principles in particular cases. Henry’s view was that the church should limit its role to negative pronouncements: it could and should say no to things socially and morally troublesome but had no mandate, jurisdiction, or competence to endorse political legislation or military tactics or economic specifics in the name of Christ.¹⁷

More than forty years after their exchange, Mouw writes, “There were times, I was convinced, that the church could rightly say a bold ‘yes’ to specific policy-like solutions. I now see that youthful conviction as misguided. Henry was right, and I was wrong.”

Mouw’s concession is both gracious and warranted. Individual Christians and the corporate body of Christ are not synonymous. To act otherwise is to get both into trouble. Moreover, to recognize the distinction between the responsibilities proper to the church

and proper to the individual is to dignify the role of the layperson and ennoble the call of the citizen.

How so? Individual Christian laypeople may well possess special competence in a policy area—like health care or welfare, national security affairs or overseas development, legal philosophy or immigration policy—that the church simply doesn't possess and shouldn't be expected to possess. In this context, the role of the church, at least as we interpret it, is to provide individual Christians with a moral framework through which they can work out their duties as citizens and engage the world in a thoughtful way, even as it resists the temptation to instruct them on how to do their job or on which specific public policies they ought to embrace.

Scripture and Forms of Government

Third, Scripture does not provide a governing blueprint.

The New Testament gives instructions on how to pray, on how congregations should function and deacons should manage their households, on how husbands and wives should treat each other, and how to care for the aged. Yet it says almost nothing at all about what we would consider public policy.

This may be, in part, because of the circumstances in which Christians found themselves at the time the New Testament was written; Rome, after all, was largely hostile to the early followers of Jesus. But whatever the reason, Scripture simply does not offer detailed guidance on (to name just a handful of contemporary issues) trade; education; welfare; crime; health care; affirmative action; immigration; foreign aid; legal reform; drilling in the Arctic region in Alaska; climate change; and much else. And even on issues that many Christians believe the Bible does speak to, if sometimes indirectly—including poverty and wealth, abortion and same-sex marriage, capital punishment and euthanasia—nothing in the text speaks to the nature or extent of legislation or the kind of prudential steps that ought to be pursued.

Whether the top marginal tax rate should be 70 percent, 40 percent, or 28 percent is a serious public policy issue—but neither the New Testament nor the Hebrew Bible sheds light on the matter. One may believe we have a scriptural obligation to be good stewards of the earth—but that doesn't necessarily determine where one will stand on the Kyoto Protocol or cap-and-trade legislation. A person can take to heart the admonition in Exodus not to “oppress a stranger”—and still grapple with the issue of whether to grant a path to citizenship to illegal immigrants. Nor does the Bible tell us whether the 1991 Gulf War was the right or wrong decision.

The Christian ethicist Paul Ramsey has written,

Identification of Christian social ethics with specific partisan proposals that clearly are not the only ones that may be characterized as Christian and as morally acceptable comes close to the original New Testament meaning of *heresy*.¹⁸

Such identification can also be discrediting. Many mainline denominations, like the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Episcopal Church, have badly damaged their credibility by taking stands on a staggering number of issues to which they have brought no special competence or insight but have simply parroted standard liberal/left talking points. The same can be said, on the other side, of the Christian Coalition, which handed out political “scorecards” and voters’ guides to congregants before elections. “What has happened, time and time again,” warns the Catholic scholar George Weigel, “is that an increasingly partisan public profile ends up stripping an organization of religiously based moral content.”¹⁹

On the other hand—and it is an important other hand—Christians as well as people of other faiths *are* provided with moral precepts that ought to guide them in pursuing justice and peace, human dignity and the moral good. If their careers happen to be in government, how should they go about it?

This is very tricky territory. People involved in public service

need to determine as best they can what is the correct stand on an array of issues and what issues deserve to be given priority. We all recognize a hierarchy of moral concern, according to which matters like war, slavery, poverty, and the protection of innocent life occupy a higher plane than questions of mass transit and funding for public television. And most of us can agree that under certain circumstances, not only individual Christians but the church itself should speak out in specific ways against specific evils. But in the vast majority of cases, what we are talking about are prudential judgments about competing priorities, and we need to approach them with humility and open minds.

Honorable people have honest disagreements. Some reflect hard on what is right and find themselves coming down on the “liberal” side of things. Others reflect hard and find themselves coming down on the “conservative” side. Yet to govern is to choose—and those in public life have a duty to develop, as best they can, a sound political philosophy, to engage in rigorous moral reasoning, and to make sure they do not become so captive to ideology that they ignore empirical evidence. And then they have to pursue policies that they believe are right and wise.

Political Involvement Takes Various Forms

Fourth, the form of political involvement adopted by Christian citizens is determined in part by the nature of the society in which they live.

If one lives in a thriving democracy, the duties of citizenship take a particular form. They range from paying taxes to voting, from serving in government to petitioning it, from speaking out in public forums to attending rallies and protests. Government is the “offspring of our own choice,” President Washington said in his Farewell Address—one that “has a just claim to [our] confidence and [our] support.”

People participating in a democratic process also need to abide

by certain rules. Among them is accepting that on particular issues—including those on which one may have deep moral convictions—an individual may lose; and when defeat occurs, the verdict needs to be accepted. This does not mean one must agree with the decision, let alone consider it final; there are no closed questions in an open society. Even when the highest court in the land issues a judgment, the matter is not necessarily settled. We saw that with the *Dred Scott* decision and with *Roe v. Wade*. Citizens in a self-governing nation need to abide by the laws even as they seek to change them. In a republic like ours, this is a duty of citizenship.

But suppose one lived in an absolute monarchy, a police state, or an Iranian-style theocracy. Obviously one could have far less influence on the actions of the regime itself, and the duties of citizenship would be quite different. An individual might become a dissident—in some cases, a martyr. But at what point *should* a Christian rise up against a state that is illegal and illegitimate, and that engages in acts that are intrinsically evil? That is not so clear, and once again we are faced with scriptural verses that are difficult to reconcile.

In the book of 1 Peter, Christians are told to obey even unjust masters, for doing so provides a powerful witness. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul wrote, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.” (The governing authority then was Nero, who persecuted Christians and burned them at the stake.) Yet Christians are also taught that, if they are ever in conflict, their duty to God is higher than their duty to the state. “We must obey God rather than men,” St. Peter asserts when the apostles are forbidden to evangelize. Much depends on the exact nature of the historical circumstances, and on individuals’ sense of duty and responsibility.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian during the time of Adolf Hitler’s rise to power. His American friends helped him escape in 1939, but he felt he had to return to

Germany in order to be in solidarity with persecuted Christians there. “I shall have no right . . . to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people,” Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Reinhold Niebuhr.²⁰ An avowed pacifist, Bonhoeffer joined an organization that was at the heart of the anti-Hitler resistance, became an advocate for the assassination of the Nazi dictator, and was eventually executed for his role in the plot. The camp doctor who witnessed the execution wrote,

I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer . . . kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this unusually lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.²¹

Bonhoeffer’s decision reflects “the finest logic of Christian martyrdom,” Niebuhr declared, and belongs “to the modern Acts of the Apostles.”²²

Of us, living in the United States, martyrdom is not demanded. Being informed and engaged, acting decently and respectfully toward others, is quite enough.

Ancient Israel Is Not the Paradigm

Fifth, God does not deal with nations today as He did with ancient Israel.

Orthodox Christians believe, as do many Jews, that the Jews are a chosen people—chosen to be in a covenant with God and called as witnesses of a true faith among the nations. “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his

treasured possession,” the book of Deuteronomy says.

The story of the Jews begins with Abraham, who left Mesopotamia for a land God called him to. In calling Abraham, God made a divine covenant that promised him a land, divine protection, and progeny as numerous as the sands of the shore. A later covenant at Sinai with the people of Israel specified rewards and punishments based on their faithfulness and conduct.

This needs to be set against other teachings and books in the Bible, including Job, where it seems that the sufferings that would befall Israel were not *solely* dependent on, or a consequence of, their moral behavior. Still, there was a belief in *communal* righteousness—that the sins of the few could lead to the punishment of the many. This in turn created a common ethic among the Hebrew people, an investment by all of its members in the integrity of the community.

Throughout American history, some people, especially the Puritans, believed that something similar applied to America. They believed that America, like Israel before it, had received a special calling from God, that it was set apart for divine purposes. Americans, too, were a “chosen people,” and America was seen as the “new” Israel, “entrusted with the responsibility of establishing a ‘righteous empire’ or a Christian commonwealth.”²³ For some, the logical corollary was that God would therefore deal with America just as He had dealt with Israel, dispensing blessings and curses according to its moral conduct.

We have seen this view articulated many times over the years—including in the comments of Pat Robertson in the aftermath of a catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. In the judgment of the Reverend Robertson, Haitians had been “cursed by one thing after another” since they “swore a pact to the devil” in order to free themselves from their subjugation to the French.

However, this view simply melts under scrutiny. For one thing, it is exceedingly arrogant for an individual to believe he can discern

the will of God and determine whether a particular tragedy is a manifestation of His judgment. For another, it raises a host of practical problems. Why would God's wrath be directed toward America or Haiti, but not, say, Iran (a repressive Islamic theocracy), North Korea (a brutal police state), or China (a Communist nation that coerces women to have abortions)? What exactly are the sins that serve as the tripwire to divine wrath? Abortion and gay marriage—or wars and indifference to poverty? Removing God from the classroom—or not welcoming illegal aliens into our country? Is God's judgment a response to outward behavior (e.g., infidelity) or to the inward spirit (e.g., pride and arrogance)?

One can see how this line of thinking—whether in the simplistic, connect-the-dots version offered up by the Reverend Robertson or in the more moderate views held by millions of other Christians—can lead one into a thicket of confusion.

On a deeper level, we believe this interpretation of national sowing-and-reaping doesn't correspond with a proper understanding of Christianity. While the Bible teaches God has judged nations, nowhere does it assume that all suffering is a sign of God's displeasure. In fact, the most important symbol in Christianity is the cross, which represents suffering, agony, and death. Speaking to Ananias, who was instrumental in the conversion of St. Paul, Jesus says, "I will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for my name." St. Paul himself, in the book of Timothy, writes, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." St. Peter speaks about the suffering that Christians will endure for doing good. And in the book of Romans we read that we are to rejoice in our suffering because it produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.

We ourselves don't pretend to understand how and why God acts in tragic events and are skeptical of those who claim they do. Such interpretations are certainly not self-evident.

Christians must reconcile their conviction that Jesus cares

deeply for us and is involved in the affairs of man with suffering and tragedy writ small and writ large. It isn't an easy thing to come to grips with. Even C. S. Lewis, a monumental figure in twentieth-century Christianity, saw his faith buckle for a time after the death of his wife, Joy (Lewis eventually recovered, though he was clearly a different man). "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God," Lewis wrote in piercing words. "The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"²⁴

What the Christian faith teaches us is that even in suffering there can be redemption; that this world, for all of its joys and sorrows, is not our home; and that at the end of our pilgrimage, beyond the sufferings of this world, there are streams of mercy, never ceasing.

SORTING THROUGH THE CHOICES

The world is a "theater of [God's] glory," John Calvin said,²⁵ and we are all actors in His unfolding drama and His redemptive purposes. Politics can therefore be a noble and important undertaking. Yet determining the precise nature of our involvement is no easy task. It depends on facts and circumstances, and it requires judgment and wisdom, discretion and humility. Some who have gone before us have gotten the balance just right, and many others have gotten it terribly wrong. It is a road some are called upon to travel, but it is filled with traps and snares. The good that Christians in politics can do is considerable, and the collateral damage politics can do to the Christian faith is substantial.

There is no easy shortcut, no prepackaged formula, that tells Christians when to get involved in politics and when to pull back, when speaking out on public matters will help or hurt their Christian witness. This side of the heavenly city, we can only peer through a glass darkly. One day the clouds will part and all things

will become clear. Until then, our obligation is to sort through, even in an imperfect way, the choices before us; to seek the counsel of people of wisdom and integrity; to examine and re-examine our motives and the state of our hearts; continually to revisit our approach and stance in light of events; and to pray, in the words of the author of Colossians, that God will fill us with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

NOTES

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21. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 927.
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25. Webber, *The Church in the World*, 127.