Sermon notes
01-06-08
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Just a few follow-up thoughts on the Psalm 98 series (the first of three, Lord willing)….

1. The George Grant book I quoted from a couple of times is titled *The Changing of the Guard.* It's a very good introduction to the kind of church-centered political activism we need. On this topic, I also really like Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of Nations* and Lawrence Adams' *Going Public.*

2. Psalm 98 stresses that the gospel (God's "marvelous work") is public truth. The gospel describes and announces "the way things really are." It is objective, historical truth. God has acted in the sight of the nations. The nations are duty bound to recognize what God has done. They are obligated to be attentive to the needs and mission of the church. They are required to pledge homage to Jesus as King of kings.

Unfortunately, American Christians have largely rejected this reality and allowed their faith to be privatized so it becomes a matter of individual piety and nothing more. In my examples of privatization, I chose two Roman Catholics (JFK, Kerry), a Methodist (G. W. Bush), and a Southern Baptist (Clinton). You may be wondering why I didn't include any Presbyterians. It was *not* because Presbyterians in politics have resisted the pressure to privatize. Rather, it was because Presbyterians have been largely politically irrelevant for several decades now (the lone exception being Ronald Reagan, who was a member of a PCUSA church, but tended to identify more with broad evangelicalism and probably couldn't be considered a Calvinist).

3. JFK's 1960 campaign speech stands in dramatic contrast to earlier Roman Catholic approaches to political involvement. Traditionally, Roman Catholic political rulers had expressed public loyalty to the pope. They openly admitted that their Catholicism would shape the way they governed. JFK's speech marked a turning point for Roman Catholics in American politics, essentially showing that Roman Christians would operate on the same individualistic premises as Protestant Christians had been for generations. Faith would be a private concern, dissociated from public life; in the public square, religious neutrality and autonomous reason would be the name of the game. What's even more interesting: JFK's speech was written by a Baptist! (This is relevant since it was the Protestant swing vote that captured the election for JFK in the end.) I think this gets to the root of the problem: in our nation's history, for whatever reason, nationalism has trumped the church. Virtually every denomination, both liberal and conservative, has succumbed to privatization; indeed, denominationalism itself is a function of privatization since denominationalism subordinates the church to consumerism and makes it impossible for the church to speak with a singular prophetic voice into the culture.

The end result is that Christians in America have identified themselves more with America and democracy than with the church and the reign of Christ. At times, we've even tried to subsume the gospel into "Americanism," creating a civil religion tailor made

to our values. I have dealt with these issues extensively elsewhere, e.g., this three part series on American Christianity that begins here:
http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/american-history-1.php

4. JFK's speech is probably still the best crystallization of American privatization. Kennedy stressed that his religious were his own business: "What kind of church I believe in should be important only to me." The only thing that mattered, as far as public life is concerned, is "what kind of America I believe in." In the speech, he endorsed religious pluralism, calling for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to "promote instead the ideal of American brotherhood." So much for JFK's baptismal vows in which he renounced the devil, the flesh, and the world, and pledged ultimate loyalty to the Triune God and his church. (Frankly, I think we would have been much better off if JFK had allowed his Catholic faith to shape his public policy…)

5. The problems of privatization are often invisible to us because we are oblivious to the highly charged political language of the NT. Terms like "gospel," "Lord," "justice," and "church" all carried heavy political resonances for the writers and first hearers of the NT texts. Preaching and the sacraments are freighted with political significance since the proclaim Christ as King and bind us to him. I have dealt with all of this elsewhere, so I will paste in an extended excerpt from my paper "When Church Bells Stopped Ringing."

Protestant Passion and Political Propaganda

All of this is more comprehensible once we consider more closely the historical origins of the Enlightenment's privatization doctrine: because the "public church" had been the engine of so much violence and oppression following the Reformation's "religious wars," religion needed to be privatized for the sake of social peace. Privatization was a way of making the world safe for commerce, capitalism, and big business. By cramming the church into the mold of a "voluntary organization," religion was made into a matter of private choice. People might still hold their religious views strongly, but they would still be nothing more than private opinions. Theology and worship, accordingly, were pushed in a pietistic direction.[1] Indeed pietism moved in lock step with the rising secularism. As the church moved to the fringe of society, leaving individuals to pursue religions ends on their own in private, the newly created secular state rushed in to fill the void left in the public arena. The church would now aid individuals in cultivating their own spirituality, but would no longer have an outward facing, public dimension to her ministry.

In Europe, the religious wars caused by the crack up of the Protestant Reformation rocked society to its foundations in a way we can hardly comprehend

[1] One illustration of this privatization may be helpful. Take the biblical term "regeneration," which occurs two times in the New Testament. In modern evangelicalism, both biblical usages have faded, so that the term "regeneration" refers neither to the new cosmic order inaugurated by Christ (Mt. 19:28), nor to the public, communal rite of baptism (Tit. 3:5); rather it usually suggests a private, unmediated religious experience. This is the legacy of the anti-ecclesiastical shift in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

from our post-Enlightenment vantage point.[2] Religious dissent in the wake of the Reformation put a tremendous strain on culture throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 supposedly brought the age of religious warfare to an end, but in the process also did something else significant: by removing religion from the sphere of public truth, the modern secular state was birthed.[3] To greatly simplify, the logic ran something like this: somehow, peace between various warring religious factions in the post-Reformational situation had to be maintained. The newly formed secular state, theoretically religiously neutral and ecclesiastically uncommitted, would take over this role. This

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[2] Peter Leithart, provides a nice summary:

> Modern politics was born, in a more than chronological sense, in the aftermath of the wars of religion. Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed out that until the seventeenth century it was assumed that uniformity of belief was a prerequisite for orderly social life. After decades of bloodshed, violence, and terror in the wars of religion, however, many came to something like the opposite conviction that, in Pannenberg's words, '*religious passion destroys social peace*.' Given a violently divided Christendom, the only sensible solution appeared to be to excise from political life the cause of these horrors -- namely, particular theological claims -- and to replace them with universally acceptable principles derived from human nature and natural law. *Modern politics was thus founded on the principle that religion is a private concern, useful insofar as it inculcates socially approved virtues of toleration and honesty, dangerous if vigorously pressed into the political arena*. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to fault those who arrived at this solution; they were, after all, desperate for peace. Yet, understandable as it may be, the solution is impossible to implement. The notion that politics can function in a religious and theological vacuum is a myth. Politics is concerned with justice; justice is inescapably a moral concept; morality in turn is inescapably religious; and true religion, in the Christian perspective, inescapably includes particular theological commitments. Christianity entails the invariably political announcement that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord; to concede that political actors may legitimately ignore this highly specific theological claim is nothing less than an abandonment of the Christian position ("The Very Modern Christian Right" http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9405/opinion/opinion.html, emphasis mine).

Also, Lesslie Newbigin:

> The nation-state, replacing the old concepts of the Holy Church and Holy Empire, is the center-piece in the political scene in post-Enlightenment Europe. After the trauma of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, Europe settled down to the principle of religious coexistence, and *the passions which had formerly been invested in rival interpretations of religion were more and more invested in the nation state*. Nationalism became the effective ideology of the European peoples, always at times of crises proving stronger than any other ideological or religious force (quoted in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 34, emphasis mine).

[3] One of the sad ironies in this whole shift, of course, is that the secular state has shed far more blood than the religious wars ever did.

newly created state would in turn be governed by another Enlightenment creation, namely, universal reason.[4]

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[4] Not everyone agrees this is the way it happened, even if this is the way social contract advocates argued for the new political order. For another interpretation of the wars of religion and the rise of modern politics, see Cavanaugh *Torture and Eucharist* 4ff. Cavanaugh says,

> As the story is told, the separation of religion and politics was necessitated by the violence between Catholics and Protestants following the Reformation. Religious passion and coercive power is a dangerous mixture. Their differentiation with the creation of the modern state would be the only way to secure peace.

Cavanaugh disagrees with this standard genealogy of the secular political order:

> Protestants and Catholics often fought on the same sides of battles, for what was at stake in these wars was not mere doctrinal zealotry but the dominance of the rapidly centralizing sovereign state over the local privileges and customs of the decaying medieval order. In other words, the wars were the effect of the rise of the centralized modern state and its need to create an autonomous political sphere from which would be excluded its greatest rival, the church. To call these 'wars of religion' is anachronistic, for what was at stake in these wars was the very creation of 'religion' as a universal impulse essentially separate from an activity called 'politics.' The resulting appearance of the plural 'religion*s*' is said to make the secular state necessary, but in fact there is nothing inherently violent in religious pluralism and theological politics *unless* one assumes that politics means the totalizing practice of the state. The distinction between politics and religion was not discovered but invented. Before the seventeenth century politics was associated with the commonweal in a broad sense, a political and moral order which included what we call state and society. The distinction of ecclesial and civil powers in the medieval period was a distinction not of spatial jurisdictions, not of means, but of ends; the temporal power served the temporary ends of *civitas terrena*, which was passing away . . . The state's monopoly on legitimate violence is meant to produce peace by resolving the conflicts in what has become known as 'civil society,' that is, the social organizations which stand 'outside' the state by virtue of their lack of access to the means of coercion. Even those who are keen to limit the state's power still rely on the myth of the state as peacemaker, as the place where the conflicts of civil society are taken up and resolved. Civil society, after all, is said to be necessarily a place of conflict, between workers and mangers, retirees and taxpayers, members of one religion and members of another. It is the state's responsibility to oversee and absorb these conflicts through its political mechanisms. Many variations on the concept of social contract exist, but all agree that peace depends at the very minimum on individuals surrendering the right to use violence to the state, the impersonal center of sovereignty. Peace, therefore, depends on the differentiation of the universal state from all particular associations beneath the state, and the limiting of the power of the state. The differentiation is usually depicted in spatial terms; religion especially must be 'removed' from the 'sphere' of the state in order to assure peace . . . Much of contemporary Christian thinking on church and state is intent on limiting the power of the state, but in fact adopts Hegel's soteriology of the state as peacemaker for the conflicts inherent in civil society . . . Because the social is the realm of conflict and compromise, the purity of the Gospel must remain a possibility only for the individual. The Gospel is allowed an inchoate motivational influence on history through the actions of private individuals; the church is a collection of such individuals, and not in any sense a communal enactment of an alternative 'politics' within history . . . . My suspicion is that the establishment of a political realm which fundamentally excludes the body of Christ as a body does not so much *solve* conflict as *enact* it. The rise of the modern centralized state is

Thus, in Europe, the modern state arose directly out of the disunity of the church. Nationalism was the product of a failed ecclesiology. Statism was the necessary antidote to a fragmented church. Once upon a time, the religious consensus of Christendom had provided the culture's stability and cohesion. One faith, one Lord, one baptism had been the glue that held society together. Now that older consensus had evaporated. A weakened, fragmented church required a strong, centralized, secular state to maintain order and keep peace. As Martin Marty has pointed out, the disestablishment of the Western church was the single biggest cultural revolution since the time of Constantine.[5] We are still coming to grips with its effects, and indeed, some churches are still not up to speed.

No one has done more to expose the link between denominationalism and secularism than Lesslie Newbigin. Denominationalism is the church's self-betrayal, the church's institutionalization of her own ethical failure to live at peace and offer a public witness to Christ's lordship. In his 1986 work, *Foolishness to the Greeks,* Newbigin dealt with the problems of denominational Christianity:

> Richard Niebuhr's dictum, "Denominationalism represents the moral failure of Christianity" has often been quoted; but he wrote that more than fifty years ago. Today the defense of denominationalism has become respectable . . . [Today] denominationalism is celebrated as the great gift of North American Christianity to the universal church.

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predicated, as we have seen above, on the transfer of authority from particular associations to the state, and the establishment of a direct relationship between the state and the individual.

I am not prepared to adjudicate between the standard reading of the history and that of Cavanaugh. For our purposes, it does not matter all that much, since both interpretations agree that the supposed split between religion and politics occurred at about the same time in history and required a corresponding overhaul in ecclesiology. The fact is, the social contractarians won the day, whether or not they had their history facts straight. "Secular" space was created to drive Christian faith out of politics. Whether the wars caused the rise of the secular nation-state or were the effect of the already emerging secular nation-state is a question to be settled at another time.

[5] Nine of the thirteen original American colonies had established churches. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights was not meant to prohibit states from establishing religion as they pleased; it did prohibit Congress from creating a national church. For an interesting study of the First Amendment from a unique angle, consult Kenneth Craycraft's *The American Myth of Religious Freedom.* Craycraft argues, with some degree of plausibility, that the ultimate intent of the First Amendment was not to protect religion from state interference, but to protect the state from religious involvement. Even if Craycraft's work could be challenged on historical grounds, there is no doubt this is how the amendment has come to function in modern America. Thus, religious freedom in America is a myth – we are certainly not free to practice ecclesial Christianity -- that is, Christianity with a robust public and communal dimension. Oliver O'Donnovan likewise calls the First Amendment the symbolic end of Christendom, since it "ended up promoting a concept of the state's role from which Christology was excluded, that of a state freed from all responsibility to recognize God's self-disclosure in history" (244-5). Again, this may not have been the *intent* of the framers (in fact, they probably could not have even *imagined* a society so completely whitewashed of public religious expression), but it has certainly been the *effect*.

Denominationalism is defended on the grounds that no denomination claims to be the only true church (as in a sect) or that the state should support and defend it above other associations. Denominations allow Christians to clump together into organization where believers agree; the existence of denominations does not preclude "spiritual" unity with other Christians across denominational lines.

But is this "spiritual" (or invisible) unity sufficient? Can denominations be faithful tools of the catholic church in this fashion? Or to put the question Newbigin's way, "How serious is it that the denominational principle requires (as all its defenders agree) the surrender of any claim to be the church in the sense in which that word is used in the New Testament?" In other words, are denominations acceptable substitutes for the parish or city-based churches we find in the apostolic era? Can denominations adequately represent the new Israel? Newbigin answers in the negative:

> In their view [that is, the view of those promoting denominationalism], the church in its true being is invisible; the denomination is a partial manifestation of the church but makes no claim to be *the* church. It is a voluntary association based on the free personal choice of a number of individuals to cooperate for certain purposes . . .
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> It is the common observation of sociologists of religion that denominationalism is the religious aspect of secularization. It is the form that religion takes in a culture controlled by the ideology of the Enlightenment. It is the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed. As Thomas Luckman says, "Once religion is defined as a private affair the individual may choose from the assortment of ultimate meanings as he sees fit." The denomination provides a shelter for those who have made the same choice. It is thus in principle unable to confront the state and society as a whole with the claim with which Jesus confronted Pilate – the claim of the truth. It not, in any biblical sense, the church . . .
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> [Denominations] cannot confront our culture with the witness of the truth since even for themselves they do not claim to be more than associations of individuals who share the same private opinions. A genuinely ecumenical movement, that is to say, a movement seeking to witness to the lordship of Christ over the whole inhabited *oikoumene* cannot [merely] take the form of a federation of denominations. It must patiently seek again what the Reformers sought – "to restore the face of the Catholic Church."

Only when we recover a genuine catholicity will we challenge the world with a "coherent and credible Christian witness to the whole human community in that place."[6] Thus, the reunification of the church should be a high priority on our *political* agenda. Reuniting the church will do far more to shape American public life that getting "our candidate" into the White House. Only a unified church can challenge secularism and pluralism.

It should be noted that this was not the first time in history religious pluralism was exploited for political ends, in particular, to establish civic peace. Indeed, the strategy of the Enlightenment philosophers is one that has been adopted

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[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, 144-146.

again and again down through the corridors of history. The book of Daniel is instructive. King Nebuchadnezzar did not mind various expressions of "private piety" in his empire, provided people were willing to bow down to his statue. This civic religion was a public way of gluing together the various competing religions and keeping peace. Worship who or what you want in private; pledge loyalty to the empire in public, or else be accused of treason. Daniel's three friends refused to privatize their faith, and the end result (after passing through a fiery trial!) was Nebuchadnezzar's conversion and public recognition of the God of Israel (Daniel 3-4). Similarly, the Roman Empire tolerated a wide range of religious diversity, provided citizens gave ultimate public allegiance to the Caesar. A religion could be licensed so long as it agreed to Rome's privatization plan. Because the early Christians refused to comply, and would not allow the church to become a pawn of the state, they were regarded as atheists![7] The Empire offered at one point to give Jesus a place in the pantheon of that gods (that is, a "place at the table" in Rome's civil discourse) but the church rejected the offer. They knew Jesus was not one deity among many; he was the Lord and Conqueror of the pagan idols. His claims and truth and lordship were every bit as public and totalizing as Caesar's; indeed, even more so. They could not purchase peace for themselves or the empire at the price of fidelity to their King and Savior.

The Lordship of Christ, the Modern State, and the Promise of *Shalom*

As we have seen, the Enlightenment sought to make religious pluralism "safe" by privatizing religion. As the story runs, the Enlightenment movement, led by architects like John Locke, Thomas Hobbs, and Jean Jacques Rousseau invented the modern state as an answer to the ecclesiastical diversity and fragmentation falling out of the Protestant Reformation. This newly formed, rational state was, in many respects, a false copy of the church offering a false plan of salvation – an alternative ecclesiology and soteriology. The Enlightenment's truncation of the church and expansion of the nation-state went hand in hand: as religion was privatized, politics was secularized.

The secular state would save us from the misery and warfare caused by differing religious convictions. It would deliver us from the religious wars that wracked Europe after the Reformation. The state would domesticate the church and put it in a cage to keep us safe from overheated dogmatists. The state rather than the church would be the agent of uniting humanity by giving the people common political ends such as "equality" or "freedom" or "making the world safe for democracy." The state would ensure people would have no higher (public) loyalty than the political order.

This is why Rousseau, a defender of modern statism, believed that Eucharistic fellowship among churches, that is, between different Christian groups,

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[7] See R. J. Rushdoony, *The "Atheism" of the Early Church.* Rushdoony quotes Justin Martyr: "We confess we are atheists so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity."

threatened the unity of the state. He knew a fractured church was weak; a united church could rival the secular state.[8] If the Eucharist was used to transgress national and cultural boundaries, it would redefine citizenship; it would make membership in the trans-national "catholic church" more important than belonging to a particular nation-state. It would be more important to be Christian than to be American or German or Southern or African-American or Chinese or whatever. Thus, the nation-state had a stake in making religion over into a commodity with multiple choices and no centralized power. This, of course, was the rise "low church" American denominationalism. Christians were all too willing to simply apply the emerging consumerism to the ecclesiastical realm.

Rousseau was right: A fragmented church has not been able to command the loyalty of the people in the way a unified state has. A new Tower of Babel has been born, in which Christians are divided from one another, and thus impotent to stand against the rising tide of political secularism. Meanwhile, the state continues to gobble up more and more cultural territory to itself (e.g., education, the arts, welfare, health care, etc.). A weak church and a mega-state go hand in hand.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, faithful Christians lost sight of the intrinsically political nature of their faith. Politics and faith became separate, parallel pursuits, never intersecting. The former was totally immersed in human culture, with no transcendent references point. The latter was formulated in such an extreme transcendent way, that it was of little cultural value. The old cliché, "he's so heavenly minded, he's of no earthly good," has proved true in the case of evangelical church.

Biblically, we can say that *the political is always religious and the religious always political.*[9] The New Testament is, in fact, shot through with political language. This political vocabulary has lost for a long time, though it is being regained today by a wide swath of scholars such as Stanley Hauerwas, Rodney Clapp, N. T. Wright, Peter Leithart, John Millbank, Barry Harvey, Oliver O'Donovan, Rodney Stark, Richard Horsley, George Lindbeck, William Cavanaugh, and so on.

The gospel is an intrinsically political message. This is not to say the gospel consists in particular pieces of legislation; rather it is to acknowledge that the gospel announces that the world has a new king – Jesus Christ. The Greek term *evangelion* was used in the ancient world to announce decisive political events of a public nature, such as the ascension of a new emperor, a great military victory, the birth of a royal heir, and so forth. Some have suggested that "gospel" should be translated as "political tidings." The term was decidedly public in nature in the first century context. It did not announce a new religious experience on offer; it announced a new state of affairs, the dawning of new phase in the imperial narrative. To the extent

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[8] Cavanaugh

[9] "Politics" here is being used the broad, classical sense. Thus the political is not merely the organization and administration of civil power (what Paul called the sword in Romans 13), but the structure and ethos of human communities (the *polis*) as a whole. Thus, the "political" is roughly synonymous with the "public" or "social." The Enlightenment reduced the "political" to civil power and legislation, just as it reduced "religion" to an ideology and/or private experience. But those definitions preclude Christian faithfulness in the public square.

that American Christians have lost sight of the intrinsically political dimension of the gospel, they have lost touch with the apostolic tradition. The gospel is the announcement that a new world order has been established through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is God's public service announcement.

Moreover, the gospel is politically charged because it has everything to do with the way we structure communal life in society. The biblical metanarrative reveals that God originally intended humanity to live in harmonious community. The fall wrecked that unity and turned diversity into division. The gospel is God's work in Christ to restore creation and to rebuild human community. Think how much time politicians spend trying to find ways to get people to live side by side in peace, without killing one another! Think how much time politicians spend trying to get achieve compromises between competing racial, social, and economic groups! And yet those contrived solutions are the equivalent to treating tumors with band-aids. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put humanity back together again. Only the gospel of Christ can mend the ripped fabric of human society. Of course, the church's failure to bear witness in this way has been disastrous. The modern church is like a detective wandering about looking for clues to a murder mystery, never realizing the solution has been in his hip pocket all along. The gospel is the answer to all the public and political ills of the modern world.

To go one step further, we can add here that we must avoid thinking of the relationship of gospel and politics in a "two-step" fashion. The gospel does not merely have political *implications* which come in at some secondary level. It's not as if the gospel is apolitical at its core, but then intrudes upon political matters when one moves out to the periphery. Instead, we must say that politics is internal to the gospel all along the way. Politics cannot be "brought into" the sphere of the gospel influence because the gospel was never separated from politics in the first place. The core declaration of the gospel, "Jesus is Lord" (Acts 2:36; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3) is as political a statement as one can make. It cannot be translated into non-particular, universal categories that meet the requirements of Enlightenment political philosophy. The announcement that Jesus is Lord demands that human society be structured in a certain way. It demands that we not exploit each other, that we turn the other cheek, that we cross over and erase all kinds of lines between the races and classes, that we pursue justice and truth in all our relationships, and so forth. "Jesus is Lord" is the seedbed of a far greater social revolution than "Liberty or death" or "Peace, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or "Liberty, fraternity, and equality " Those other slogans are supercharged political declarations, to be sure, but none of them are as radically subversive and transformative as the declaration of Acts 2:36. Thus, we do not need to *add* politics to the gospel; rather, we need to understand the political shape the biblical gospel has had all along, and restructure our own lives and agendas accordingly.

Early opponents of the church understood these issues. Pagans knew the declaration of Christ's lordship was a threat to the status quo of the Roman Empire. In Acts 17, the Christians are accused of treason against Caesar because they were preaching "another king – Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Here, an ordinary, mundane Christian practice (preaching the gospel) is seen to be a directly political action. Indeed, it turns the entire existing social order "upside down" (Acts 17:6) – or more

accurately, from the perspective of the gospel itself – right side up. If our evangelism does not lead people to believe we're proclaiming an alternative King and kingdom, we have fallen short of the biblical message.[10]

Jews also had an acute sense of the politics of the gospel. The gospel-wrought reconciliation of Jew and Gentile believers in Christ (cf. Eph. 2:11ff) is thoroughly political. It restructures the ethics and makeup of human community, transforming the old world order into something new. Jews understood very clearly that the gospel turned their political order upside as well, every bit as much as the Gentiles. The gospel caused just as much chaos in Jewish contexts as it did in pagan ones (cf. Acts 19:21ff; 21:26ff).

Modern Christians are often more "modern" than "Christian" at just this point. The "Religious Right" is a case in point. The "Religious Right" is the creation of American evangelicalism, as an attempt to "apply" the gospel to American politics. But the movement is deeply flawed because it follows the Enlightenment in defining politics too narrowly (as a civil power game) and never calls into question the basic assumptions of modernity (e.g., the nature of "religion" as a private belief system or ideology). It plays by modernity's rules instead of the gospel's rules. It does not make the declaration of Christ's lordship the center of its political agenda; indeed, the "Religious Right" is usually far more modest, asking only for a "place at the table" of American public discourse. But Christ did not tell us to get him a place at the table of religious pluralism; he told us to make the nations his disciples (Mt. 28:18-20).

The "Religious Right" still operates in terms of the religious freedom of the individual rather than the freedom of the church to be the church. There is still a lingering tendency on the part of some politically active evangelicals to view politics, narrowly defined, as the source of cultural transformation. In this respect, not only has the movement lost sight of the social role of the church, but the "Religious Right" has not come to grips with the end of Christendom, and still looks rather naively to the civil government and other cultural institutions (e.g. Disney, Wal-Mart) to uphold vaguely Christian moral standards. It is ironic that many involved in the "Religious Right" are quicker to "discipline" (via boycotts) major corporations like Disney for failing to uphold traditional moral values, even though they generally fail to discipline members of their own congregations for moral failings! They're looking to extra-ecclesiastical structures to do their disciplining for them. They must learn that the world is the world; the job of the church is to provide a contrast to the society by being holy (distinct, different) at precisely those points where the world is most fully rebelling against Christ's lordship.

Because the "Religious Right" divorces politics from the church's mission and fails to reckon with the intrinsically political character of the gospel, it can offer no sustained challenge to the Enlightenments' program of privatization. Indeed, the "Religious Right" has been too quick to comply with post-Enlightenment political philosophy. The "Religious Right" errs in thinking America somehow intrinsically belongs to "us," to evangelical Christians. Thus, it continues to take an "us versus them" approach to the so-called culture wars, rather than an "us-serving-them"

[10] Obviously, this indicts the vast majority of American evangelicalism's evangelism.

approach. The result is that the "Religious Right" appears to be more interested in throwing rocks at the secular culture than reaching that culture with the humble, sacrificial love of Christ. But if leadership comes through service, it's hard to see how the "Religious Right" movement will ever accomplish much.

The political program of the "religious Right" isn't really explicitly Christian and does not grow out of the church's mission or ministries; instead it promotes a bland "traditional values" platform. The movement does not view the church as intrinsically political, especially in her liturgy, sacraments, preaching, discipline, hospitality, etc. It does not view the Bible as a political, covenantal book. Rather, for the "Religious Right," the only way to act "politically" in the world is to lobby, organize voters, promote candidates, march on Washington, write letters to the editor, and so on. In this model, politics has to be "tacked on" to preaching, baptism, and the Eucharist since these are viewed as intrinsically private acts rather than public. The only "political weapons" in the arsenal are identical to those used by the secularists. We'll return to these thoughts in the next section to unfold more fully what we mean by the political nature of the church.

The Church's Political Vocabulary and Political Practices

We have just noted above that the New Testament's "gospel" language functions not merely at the level of personal salvation, but also at the level of the political and the public as well. Evangelism is a *political* activity. The claim "Jesus is Lord" was a direct assault on Caesar's idolatrous pretensions. If Jesus is the world's true king, Caesar's kingship can be nothing more than a shallow parody. Martin Lloyd Jones pointed out that we haven't really preached the gospel to someone unless they ask us the question of Romans 6:"Are you saying that because I'm justified by grace, I can live in sin?" Likewise, we can say we haven't preached the gospel to an unbeliever unless he says back to us "You're preaching another king – Jesus!" Evangelism is not just about offering "personal" salvation or a new religious experience. It's about announcing the world's new king and calling people to faithful submission.

As we declare this gospel, and summon people into the new kingdom, we find that God does marvelous and miraculous things. The lion is set loose. Think of Luther's quip: "See how much he has done through me even though I just prayed and preached. The Word did it all . . . [W]hile I sat still and drank beer with Philip in Hahnsdorf, God dealt the papacy a mighty blow." When we announce the crucified one is now Lord of all, history shoots off in new directions. Culture is transformed. Society is recreated. The mere preaching of the gospel – if we really got it right – would be enough to cast down the strongholds of secularism (2 Cor. 10:4-11).

Preaching is thoroughly political. It shapes and reshapes the world. It directs the course of history. Herman Melville recognized this when he called the pulpit the "prow of culture." But other Christian practices are political as well. Indeed the entire life of the church has a political texture to it.

Take prayer as another example. We don't need to "add" politics to prayer in order to make it "public." Instead we need to realize how politically potent prayer already is. Biblically speaking, prayer is the primary way God brings radical change

in the public square. If we want to change our society, we shouldn't bother marching on Washington. Instead we should (to quote Hauerwas) "pray like hell" – and then watch what God does.

Prayer is intensely political because it is supplication offered before the *throne* of grace. We may be excluded from places of political power on earth. We may not hold prominent positions in government. We may not be cabinet members, with access to the oval office.

But we have something better than all these things. We are bride of Christ. And if Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, then that makes the church Queen of queens. We have power in the world because our divine husband, the one who rules over all things in heaven and earth, consults with us and hears us. As a good husband, he listens to his bride.

Or, to use a different biblical image, we are members of God's prophetic counsel. Just as God took "advice" from Abraham, Moses, and Amos, so now he takes counsel with his all people. There is tremendous power in corporate prayer. We are members of the heavenly cabinet with access to the oval office of the universe, the cosmic Most Holy Place.[11]

Prayer, thus, directs the course of history. Through the prayers of the saints, God causes empires to rise and fall, battles to be won and lost, rulers to come and go. While prayer's power should be understood in terms of, rather than in conflict with, God's ultimate sovereignty, we need to also do justice to the way prayer actually shapes God's action in history.[12]

The church herself is described in highly political terminology in the New Testament. The church is called a "kingdom" (Rev. 1:5) and a "royal priesthood" (1 Pt. 2:4-10). The word for "church" in the Greek is *ekklesia* and was used in the ancient Greco-Roman world to describe political assemblies, such as town meetings.

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[11] Peter Leithart speaks of the "throne of grace" as the "cosmic bridge." See *The Kingdom and the Power*, 98.

[12] The best discussion of this is probably John Frame, No Other God. Prayer's efficacy is not found at the level of God's decree or plan, which was settled before the foundation of the world. But God's plan includes the prayers of his people. Prayer interacts with God's will at the level of covenantal immanence. There is much mystery here, but we dare not rule out the efficacy of prayer if we are to be true to God's whole counsel.