

Make Christianity Weak Again:
Thinking Through a Biblical Worldview on Political Involvement
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A Christian looking for a political outlook to integrate with his biblical worldview will find seemingly persuasive arguments for both left and right wing formulations of Christian politics. It is our goal here to outline the underlying ideas in the conservative and progressive perspectives and test them for consistency with a biblical worldview. Despite the confusion which can come about as a result of hearing so many contradictory but well-formulated perspectives, some firm conclusions may be reached about the kind of society Christians should prefer and the role that we should seek to have in our nation's political dialogue.

The Biblical Account of the Origin and Role of Government

To begin with, we ought to have some understanding about how the Bible views the origin and role of government. As to origin, we should note that the Bible in no place specifies any particular political scheme as the one which God favors, though it is clear that He is sovereign over kings and nations. The first king mentioned in the Bible is Nimrod (see Gen. 10), who is described as a mighty warrior. This suggests that his throne was consolidated by force. It is stated that one of the first centers of his kingdom was in Shinar (in Gen. 10:10), where the Tower of Babel was built to consolidate human power. This attempt was thwarted by God via His sending a confusion of languages upon humanity to limit the unification of political hegemony. In the case of Israel a king is actually chosen by the people—though God and the prophet Samuel both warn Israel against this act. The biblical record is somewhat vague but at least consistent with the classical liberal viewpoint that kings emerge on the basis of the consent (even if by subjugation) of a larger populace which is no more entitled to rule as the king is.

As for the role of government, scripture gives us both the benefits and drawbacks of centralized authority. We are told in Judges 21:25 that the wickedness of Israel stemmed from their not having a monarch to organize their moral chaos, though 1 Samuel 8:10-18 also records the warning of God that

a king will confiscate the property of the people and make war using their sons as cannon fodder. The books of Kings and Chronicles are ripe with stories of good kings who bless Israel and Judah as well as bad kings which oppress the people and lead them into moral depravity. The Old Testament also records that God judges kings for their oppression of the poor and weak:

“Hear the word of the Lord to you, king of Judah . . . : Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin” (Jeremiah 22:2-5, NIV).

So, we know what a government should not do—oppress those in need and punish the innocent. What, ideally, will a government do? According to Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:14, it will punish the evildoer while commending and rewarding those who do good. Paul also suggests in Romans 12-13 that governments should do this because Christians cannot, a complication for the Christian's relationship to government which we will address later.

Two Modern Views of Politics

Moving past this basic level understanding of the role of government, we might begin to ask whether Christians ought to have a conservative or progressive outlook when it comes to the role of government on more minute details. To answer this question, it would be helpful to examine what a conservative and progressive outlook actually are at root. The names themselves suggest a policy of conserving traditional political and social values or progressing to something better. These viewpoints are represented in their early formation, according to conservative political analyst Yuval Levin in his

book The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left, by the 18th century political theorists Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine respectively. The grounding of these perspectives seems to have been their views of how government actually originates and evolves over time.

Where Paine saw states as tending toward corruption from their original purpose to guarantee the rights of an equal people, Burke saw societies as building over time toward a more perfect system—though small repairs could be made as needed. Though it wouldn't be improper today to argue that the progressive seems to be looking forward to a perfect eschaton while the conservative looks back to a blissful Eden, it is worth noting that this is in some senses a reversal of how Burke and Paine, those founts from which our modern right and left flow, saw civilization. Paine was a “radical” in the most traditional sense of the word—one who sought to bring civilization back to its hypothetical anarchist foundations so that something new which respected the equal rights of all men could be created. Conversely, Burke was in a sense the real progressive since his argument was that we are where we are because society has evolved through a kind of natural selection where what was ineffective in older times fell away like a useless vestigial organ.¹ Indeed, Burke was something of a political Darwinist. From his point of view, Paine was seeking to go back to the social equivalent of a one-celled organism and forego the evolutionary advances we have made. Indeed, for Burke even a revolution which seeks to level the stratas of society will eventually result in someone ruling, and it will undoubtedly be the wrong kind of someone—someone not of the ruling class which social development has formed.² Such

1 Might this notion of minor reform over radical revolution be what Paul had in mind when he asked Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother rather than as a slave even though he didn't ask Christians to rebel against the political order which slavery was built upon? Or was it that for Paul the kingdom of God comes by transforming the mind and heart, not coercing the body?

2 A conservative in the Burkean sense moves slowly and deliberately toward the future, believing that what is unworthy will be stripped away in time, but is skeptical about change which is too abrupt. This hesitation is more consistent with how we see conservatism today, and Burke has a harsh rebuke for the radical progressive who seeks to undo all that has been previously established:
“With them it is a sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with regard to the duration of a building run up in haste, because duration is no object to those who

a view is not only Darwinistic, but proto-Nietzschean. In sum, Burke bases his view of society on evolutionary principles; Paine on universal truths.³

However, this doesn't get Paine out of the Christian dog house. Though the conservative sees the world as a struggle between two forces—order and chaos—the liberal sees it as a struggle between oppressor and oppressed (particularly in the case of more radical leftists like Karl Marx). In our modern age, we could place these filters on the issues of gay marriage and police relations with minority communities. The conservative sees gay marriage through the lens of the dichotomy of a traditional order and a liberalizing chaos which threatens to rip apart the foundation of civilized society, whereas the liberal sees the opposing sides as a privileged class attempting to oppress an underprivileged class by hoarding rights and benefits for themselves. On the issue of police relations with minority communities, the right sees police as the enforcers of moral order and those whom they use violence against as agents of chaos and crime seeking to disrupt civilized society. In contrast, the left sees these same parties as the enforcement wing of an oppressive class holding down an oppressed class of people.

Though this view may resonate at points with scripture (recall that Mary's announcement of the gospel included praising God because, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" [Luke 1:52, NIV].), it is not ultimately adequate because it, like the conservative model, is

think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery. They conceive, very systematically, that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous, and therefore they are at inexorable war with all establishments" (Burke).

Paine responded to these charges of impracticality and philosophical anarchy by situating the revolutionaries' argument on different grounds—that of principle:

"Is this the language of a rational man? Is it the language of a heart feeling as it ought to feel for the rights and happiness of the human race? On this ground, Mr. Burke must compliment all the governments in the world, while the victims who suffer under them, whether sold into slavery, or tortured out of existence, are wholly forgotten. It is power, and not principles, that Mr. Burke venerates; and under this abominable depravity he is disqualified to judge between them. Thus much for his opinion as to the occasions of the French Revolution. I now proceed to other considerations" (Paine).

3 Not only this, but Paine, though a deist, was strongly influenced by his Quaker background's preference for the weak over the strong, which is indeed a preference which seems represented in scripture (see the Magnificent in Luke 1, Jesus' test for salvation in Matthew 25, and Paul's discussion of the incarnation in Philippians 2).

predicated on separating society into two opposing classes of people—one of which must be reacted to with force if justice is to be done. More than that, both models, though perhaps valid in certain circumstances, define the good on the basis of either tradition (privileging the ruling class) or progress (privileging the oppressed class) instead of on the basis of universal values and the unified nature of humanity—both in our sin and in the solution to our sin of being made on man in Christ. Progressivism is perhaps even more open to this danger since it often bases justice on the revenge instinct and is constantly looking to overthrow some newly theorized ancient aristocracy. Burke saw this clearly when he wrote that, “their principles always go to the extreme . . . [they will] push for the more perfect, which cannot be attained without tearing to pieces the whole contexture of the commonwealth” (Levin, p. 133). Indeed, Paine himself should have learned this lesson after narrowly escaping an execution in a French jail on the charge of not being sufficiently radical. Paine was undoubtedly correct in his critique of Burke's traditionalism when he wrote against, "associating [precedents] with a superstitious reverence for ancient things, as monks show relics and call them holy" (Paine). But Burke was equally correct when he noted that a revolution, once institutionalized, will tend toward an even greater authoritarianism than what it replaced:

"The very same vice assumes a new body. The spirit transmigrates; and, far from losing its principle of life by the change of its appearance, it is renovated in its new organs with a fresh vigor of juvenile activity . . . You are terrifying yourselves with ghosts and apparitions, whilst your house is the haunt of robbers." (Burke).

Though by no means an entirely satisfactory Christian alternative, one might also examine economist Arnold Kling's libertarian dichotomy of freedom and coercion, which seeks to limit force and expand freedom, detailed in his essay “The Three Languages of Politics.”

In the previous century Christian politics in America went through two major transformations. The first was from a broadly politically progressive faith to a somewhat politically detached one due to the rise of secularism and the events of the Scopes monkey trial. The next transformation, from politically uninvolved to politically conservative, originally coalesced around the purported right of Christian colleges like Bob Jones University to discriminate against students of color while receiving federal funds under the banner of religious freedom. This right-wing Christianity was consolidated by bringing evangelicals over to the pro-life movement (where we had been conspicuously absent when the decision of *Roe v Wade* came down in 1973) and was further fortified over issues such as prayer in school, gays in the military, and gay marriage.⁴

Such rapid shifts on public policy might suggest that scripture doesn't give us anything to stand on when it comes to how we ought to view the state and relate to it. However, there are some railings we can place around this issue to help us to navigate this rough terrain more biblically.

To begin with, the New Testament is fairly explicit that, even though God may use the violence of the state for good ends, Christians cannot participate in that violence. Though Paul is clear that Christians may not "repay anyone evil for evil," or "take revenge . . . but leave room for God's wrath" (Romans 12:17-19, NIV), he is also clear that the magistrates (which, in Paul's time, were uniformly pagan polytheists) are "God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4, NIV).

Jesus also excludes Christians from performing these violent duties when He explains to Pilate why, though He is a king, His servants won't fight to release Him from the death penalty imposed upon Him by the state oppressors:

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36, NIV).

⁴ See Randall Balmer's 2014 article in Politico at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>

Indeed, Christians are to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39) and remember that, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:21-23, NIV).

The reason for this is simple: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12, ESV). The chief influence of Christians upon society ought to be to transform hearts and minds, not to coerce bodies. Our goal should not be to make America great again, but to make Christianity weak again—at least when it comes to our ability to coerce others through physical force. Indeed, we are to be weak as Christ was weak. In fact, Paul is even clear that it is not our job to judge those outside of the church, but that we must leave that work to God (1 Corinthians 5:12).

If the state's tool is destructive violence, and Christians are forbidden its exercise, how then should the two relate? A traditional Anabaptist answer to this question is to forbid Christians from participation in the state in any capacity, though the New Testament isn't as explicit on this point as we would like it to be—its human authors did not foresee a time when Christians would have the opportunity to participate in any meaningful way in statecraft. But if we are to venture out into the world of politics, we must remember the lessons listed above which scripture seeks to teach us:

1. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of men are distinct.
2. The kingdom of God is not, at this stage, physical, so it does not use violence but spiritual power.

If then, we are to participate in the state, we must do so as those who cannot ultimately give ourselves only to secular realities. At minimum, this means we cannot use or encourage the violence of the state. What then should we encourage the state to do from our unique vantage points as Christians?

The apostles Peter and Paul give us some direction for the kind of state that we as Christians should prefer. For one, we should prefer a state which benefits those doing good and is a terror to those doing evil (Romans 13, 1 Pet 2:14), not the reverse. In other words, we should prefer a state where justice is done and the corrupt are not rewarded. In addition, we ought to prefer a state which gives us the freedom to preach the gospel and live out our lives unmolested (1 Timothy 2:1-3). We also ought to be willing to use our influence to rally the cause of peace, knowing that this is at the heart of God and the war destroys precious instances of the image of God. Let us remember that the 2nd century church father Justin Martyr wrote in his First Apology that God's promise that future nations would beat their swords into ploughshares had been fulfilled in the church, whose members, "formerly used to murder one another [though] do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ" (Martyr).

This command to peace must be *followed by* the disciples of Christ, but we should also use our influence for the cause of peace in this age. This is to say that we should seek to make the secular world look a little bit like the kingdom of God through our example of peacemaking.

This seems to point us in the direction of libertarianism—looking to focus the state upon the essential tasks of protecting the safety of its people, deterring those who would seek to harm others, and allowing the free and open preaching and living out of the gospel of Christ. It should be stated with firmness that this requires cultivating an environment where the freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly can flourish for everyone, lest we give the state the power to regulate our own freedom of worship after we have sought to use it to regulate that of others. This is important not only for our freedom as Christians, but also for the purpose of our evangelism—we cannot preach a gospel of love to a people whom we have sought to subject politically. We cannot tell people about the freedom of Christ after we have done the Christian equivalent of forcing them to pay the *jizya*.

Going back to the issue of gay marriage which was discussed earlier in regard to left and right

wing dichotomies, something of a biblical answer to this issues begins to emerge. If we do not desire a state which has the power to regulate our marriages or censure those who hold what society sees as the wrong view of marriage, we should seek a state which does not side with either a right wing evangelical or a gay activist solution to the issue, but one which allows homosexuals and Christians to co-exist peacefully.

To summarize, an ideal society for Christians to live in will be broadly libertarian for at least five reasons:

1. Christians can live without fear of oppression.
2. The gospel can be shared openly.
3. The faith cannot be as easily compromised by political power nor can one powerful group of Christians enforce a false orthodoxy on others.
4. Evangelism will not be thwarted by our attempts to subjugate others.
5. The Christian goal of peacemaking can be more easily realized in a society which has as its default position a desire to avoid war.

In this sense, the classical liberal theory of the rights of man is somewhat confirmed by a rational application of the principles of scripture. However, a Christian should not see humanity through the Enlightenment lens of having natural rights which give us the power to do whatever we choose to whomever we want, though we may limit these freedoms by entering into a social contract with the state. A Christian should instead see human rights through the lens of scripture which tells us that all human beings are made in the image of God and that the value of each and every human must be respected by all—even non-Christian kings. Our rights are not based on our animal nature, but the divine image represented in our humanity. Building on that foundation, we should also note that the Hebrew mind didn't think in terms of individual rights, but of relational obligations. A Christian should want to think in libertarian terms not because of an Enlightenment philosophy of rights, but because

Christ has commanded us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This distinction between Christianity and Enlightenment era liberalism is an important one because it allows us to discern whether, if liberty cannot provide an essential service to those in need, the state may be called upon to do so lest our brothers and sisters in humanity perish.⁵

Conclusion

The lens through which the Christian ought to view the world ought to be Christ—particularly His chosen weakness in order that He might love and serve others (Phillipans 2:6-9). This requires that we give up our desire to subjugate other human beings and to treat the political arena as a battleground by which we wage crusades using the pagan tools of kings and soldiers. Indeed, we should go out of our way to love others and ensure their peace and liberty. If we are to call everyone to the marriage supper of the lamb, we must make room at the table.

5 The common libertarian slogan that “taxation is theft” assumes that whatever we have we have earned, which isn't always the case. We begin with what we inherit, whether property or opportunities. Doing unto others means acknowledging that if we were less fortunate, we would want opportunities to succeed. To paraphrase Paine, we would want a government that protected our “natural rights” by giving us opportunities to exercise them. However, remembering that government works through coercion will give us second thoughts about replacing free choice with government force.

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