

Christ

and

the

**Foundations
of Political
Life**

**Kingdoms
of Men**

David C. Innes

Foreword by Carl R. Trueman

“It has been two or three decades since anyone has written a fairly comprehensive treatment of the role of government from a Christian perspective, let alone a Reformed one. No matter what nuanced views one might have about this or that, this book is long overdue and much needed in Christian circles, including in the classrooms of Christian colleges and universities. The Lord of heaven desires that we serve him in the governmental-political-legal realm here on earth, and this book helps us know how to do that. In addition, it enables us to ask the important questions that might take us deeper into this most crucial subject. Dr. Innes has given all of us, of whatever theological stripe, a critical work at a critical time.”

—**Kevin L. Clauson**, Professor of Government & Law; Chair,
Department of Government & Justice; Director, Center for
Faith, Freedom, and the Constitution, Bryan College

“What happens when a former pastor with deep training in Reformed theology, a PhD in political science from one of the most prestigious graduate programs in the country, and decades of college classroom experience writes an introductory textbook on politics? *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men!* This volume is the most serious work of its kind and is must reading for young men and women in need of an orientation to the politics of this world drawn from a prudent teacher who knows the difference between God’s kingdom and the principalities of men.”

—**David Corbin**, Provost and Professor of Politics, Providence
Christian College

“In *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*, Dr. Innes offers an excellent contribution to Christian political thought: an erudite and well-synthesized theology of politics that is steeped in Scripture and in the riches of tradition—all while attending carefully to the questions and problems that are central to political theory. If you are looking for vague virtues and gentle generalizations that will sit comfortably with all readers, look elsewhere. Instead, Innes offers a bracing, pithy, and Reformed account of the Bible’s teaching on politics that is both far-reaching and concise. Readers will be instructed, exhorted, and challenged to greater

faithfulness and further inquiry by Innes's fine work—both where they agree with him and where they wish to debate.”

—**Jesse Covington**, Associate Professor of Political Science,
Westmont College

“David C. Innes's *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men* is a remarkable accomplishment. At once learned and lucid, sophisticated and accessible, the book certainly serves its principal audience—students and the reading public—exceedingly well. But teachers and Christian intellectuals should not be misled by the word *foundations* in the subtitle. The book is a formidable synthesis of deep scriptural and theological learning, on the one hand, and a broad and rich understanding of the history of political philosophy, on the other. We will long be in Professor Innes's debt.”

—**Joseph M. Knippenberg**, Professor of Politics, Oglethorpe
University

“David Innes's new contribution to clear thinking about politics includes dramatic quotations that show our sinful nature, including one from serial killer Carl Panzram: ‘I wish the entire human race had one neck and I had my hands around it!’ Some on the right express a similar sentiment about federal officials, but Dr. Innes is far wiser than they, and also wiser than those on the left such as former Rep. Barney Frank, quoted within as saying, ‘Government is simply the name we give to the things we choose to do together.’ *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men* shows that we have many ways to do things together: all who read it will learn which activities should involve government, and which should not.”

—**Marvin Olasky**, Editor-in-chief, *World* magazine

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To my little polis, my community of trust and forgiveness: my wife, Jessica, and my children, Eowyn, David, Alexander, and Abigail

* * *

“All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” (Ps. 22:27–28)

“His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation.” (Dan. 4:3)

“On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Rev. 19:16)

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Foreword

IT HAS BECOME something of a cliché to say that we live in times of political division and polarization, yet that does not make the statement any less true. The obsession of the left with identity politics and the resurgence on the populist right of the old gods of nationhood and ethnic nativism have created a situation in which civil political discourse seems almost impossible and pessimism about the future grips people across the political spectrum. For Christians in particular, the temptation of extremism or populism is to be avoided—but how? To borrow a phrase from conservative journalist Rod Dreher, one cannot fight something with nothing. To avoid the madness of the currently dominant political ideologies, one must have something with which to replace them.

In such a time, David Innes has provided Christians with a book that will prove immensely helpful in encouraging them to think in a calm and sober manner about the role of politics in their lives and their role in politics. The framework is straightforward: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. The argument is carefully expounded, moving from the nature and necessity of politics through the appropriate role of government to the manner in which civil obedience—or disobedience—should be understood. And the sources are catholic in the best sense of the word, providing the reader both with a sweeping view of political thought from Plato to Obama and with Christian reflections on politics from Paul to Robert George. Along the way, the reader encounters Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, the Federalists, Jefferson, and Strauss, to name but a handful. The book is both a cogent argument in itself and an implicit guide to further reading and reflection.

This is important. Intelligent interaction with the politics of the

present really demands thoughtful reflection on the great political thinkers of the past. But that can be a daunting exercise. Who wants to spend time wrestling with the thought of Aristotle or Aquinas without some help? In an era when politics seems defined by the medium of Twitter and the aesthetics of outrage, calm, deep reflection is desirable but not easy to accomplish. That is why David's learning and ability to communicate important and often-complicated ideas in a concise and clear manner are so helpful. This book is not simply about the American politics of the moment; it is a class in how to think politically.

David is no antiquarian, simply collating the opinions of others. He has his own string of convictions that he argues here with gusto, as he critiques excesses of left and right, pushing against the big-government tendencies of a Barney Frank while also highlighting the inadequacies of libertarianism. His modest claim, that liberal democracy is the best social option and one that most obviously allows the church to flourish, is well made.

David and I would disagree in some areas. For example, I suspect that his view of the role of government is a little more restrictive than mine. But that is a difference in application of the principles he identifies, not one of substance. We are in full agreement in this: earthly politics for the Christian is to be a modest exercise. Christians can—and should—strive to be good citizens of this earthly kingdom, given its fallen state and its limitations, but their real home lies in the kingdom of heaven. That is not an excuse to neglect earthly political responsibilities here and now—David's adherence to a robust doctrine of creation precludes that option—but it is to argue for an understanding of the proper limits of earthly politics and thus for a realistic understanding of what we can expect to achieve on this side of the eschaton. That should be both reassuring and encouraging to those tempted by our current cultural malaise to despair or to throw in their lot with the extremists of either wing.

Carl R. Trueman
Grove City College

Preface

IN A WAY, this book began when I first started taking justice and politics seriously with my involvement in the Canadian federal by-elections of 1978. I was sixteen, and I was sure that politically and economically there were right and wrong ways of doing things! Wrong ways were happening; right ways should be done. Three years later, Introduction to Political Philosophy was an obvious choice for a freshman university course. By junior year, I was committed to political philosophy—the contemplative pursuit of wisdom—as a vocation. That same year, God led me into his covenant community, and the following year opened my eyes to my sin and my heart to his Son.

I thank Clifford Orwin at the University of Toronto for seeing to it that a particular nineteen-year-old lad was properly introduced to Plato, Machiavelli, de Tocqueville, and the serious study of carefully written books. As I have matured in my thought, I have come more and more to see the influence of my sponsor and mentor at Boston College, Ernest Fortin, A.A. (1923–2002). Daniel J. Mahoney, for whom I filled in at Assumption College in 1992, showed me how to teach Introduction to Politics—which, in a way, was the practical beginning of this book. Years later, The King's College gave me broad latitude to take it from there and develop my thoughts, in conversation with my students, on the foundations of politics.

I thank Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto, the Banner of Truth Trust, and the Rev. Irfon Hughes for teaching me Reformed theology; Gregory Beale and Gordon Hugenberger for introducing me to biblical theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; Bible Presbyterian Church of Cono Center (PCA) for allowing me to learn and practice the faithful exercise of authority; and my pastor, the Rev. Benjamin

Miller, for his deeply thoughtful, graciously biblical, and pastorally engaging ministry these last fourteen years.

Thanks go to my colleague Matthew Parks and my faculty assistant, Aidan Gauthier, for lending their eyes to review the manuscript, and to J. K. Wall for his consultations on the mediatorial dominion of Christ.

I am grateful to Mickey McLean at *World* magazine for his wise oversight as my editor for the columns I was privileged to submit from 2010 to 2016 and for his permission to republish some of the content in this book; to Jeffrey Green at *The City* for permission to republish content from “Trust and the Republic” (Summer 2011); and to the organizers of the 2012 American Dream Conference at Cedarville University for the opportunity to think more fruitfully about faith and prosperity.

Because *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men* is intended not only for academics and their students but also for nonacademic readers, whenever possible I cite easily accessible sources that might also be on a college course syllabus.

Introduction:

Why the Christian Study of Politics?

AT A GLANCE, politics appears to be just one subject among many that occupy people's interest. Some are into art. Some are into sports or business. And some are into politics. But politics is not just any subject.

First, politics is fundamental to how God presents himself to us and what he is doing in the world. God is the *sovereign* Creator of all things. As such, he *governs* his creation with absolute authority. He gave his first created people a *law*: “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). In disobeying that law, they *rebelled* and put themselves at *war* with God. In his plan of redemption, God formed a *nation* and called it to be holy. He gave it a *law*. He later gave it a *king*, bringing into clearer focus what in the New Testament is called *the kingdom of God*. That king anticipated the Savior, who is the *King of kings and Lord of lords*. When that Savior-King began preaching, he said, “Repent, for the *kingdom of heaven* is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). At the end of the book of Acts, Luke relates that the apostle Paul went about “proclaiming *the kingdom of God*,” identifying it with the gospel itself (Acts 28:31). In the end, God will *judge* the nations. Jesus will “*rule* them with a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15). The history of redemption ends in a blissful *city*, the new Jerusalem. Throughout the Bible, God expresses his redemptive work in political terms.

This political language of rule is not just one of many metaphors that God uses to describe himself and what he is doing. God calls

himself a shepherd, but he is not literally a shepherd because his people are not literally sheep. But he literally rules. His laws are literally laws. He literally judges, punishes, and shows mercy. The glory that he deserves and that he will surely receive in full measure is real glory. Politics is fundamental to the nature and end of the entire created order. This argument is not to bring God and his ways down to the petty concerns of human political life. Rather, it shows that behind our petty jockeying for power and our strife over how best to live is a far higher reality, a real majesty that radiates down on our human officeholders and their civic business and calls them to high moral purpose. Rather than trivialize God, this insight reveals the nobility of political life to which its practice rarely conforms.

For this reason, we are investigating the specifically Christian understanding of politics. To the average person, this sounds tribalist, like a Bosnian introduction to politics or an introduction that purports to bring the coal miner's or the music lover's perspective. But the one true and living God is the Maker of all things, and thus the King over all creation and Judge of the nations (Col. 1:6; Jer. 10:6–12; Rev. 19:11–16). His word on things is the ultimate and final word. Investigation into any matter within his creation, especially matters of great moral consequence such as politics, must (after our common experience of things) begin with what he has told us concerning himself, ourselves, and the world in which we live. Thus, we cannot rightly understand political power apart from the context of God's creator-sovereignty and the redemptive history of creation, fall, and redemption. Otherwise, we would see ourselves free to use political power as we please rather than as God intends, and thus to our greater misery rather than for our benefit.

Second, politics is important because political authority carries with it what the ancient Romans called *jus vitae et necis*, the "power of life and death." The apostle Paul calls it the power of the sword (Rom. 13:4). Before the flood, human wickedness was unrestrained, and so all manner of lawlessness covered the earth: "the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). After God punished this conduct by a great deluge, he announced to Noah a new divinely appointed means for restraining evil:

From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

“Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.” (Gen. 9:5–6)

The first reference to an actual government after this veiled reference to government’s coercive authority comes in Genesis 12, where Abram encounters Pharaoh in Egypt.¹ Before that, we saw city life and private revenge, but no sword-bearing government. Obviously, this power of capital punishment is dangerously subject to abuse. But removing the power would only expose us to the same power that your neighbors hold: the power to hit you over the head and take your stuff or to punish what are only mistakenly perceived offenses, or to punish actual offenses disproportionately, as did Lamech, who killed a man for wounding him.²

Third, politics, above almost all other matters, is important to study because political authority provides the peace necessary for doing everything else, whether it is learning French, playing football, buying and selling, raising a family, or worshipping God. Peace is the garden of the arts and of all culture. Shakespeare’s Duke of Burgundy calls it “dear nurse of arts, plenties and joyful births.”³ Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), remarks that if there is no government to restrain

1. Interestingly, the first civil government to appear in the Bible is pagan, setting itself in opposition to God. Equally noteworthy are the facts that the first cities were those of Cain, Adam and Eve’s wayward child, that the first artisans and artists were the sons of Cain, and that wicked Lamech is the Bible’s first recorded poet.

2. On this subject, John Locke observes, as anyone could, what state of affairs would prevail among people in the absence of sword-bearing civil government: “To this strange doctrine, *viz.* That *in the state of nature every one has the executive power of the law of nature*, I doubt not but it will be objected, that it is unreasonable for men to be judges in their own cases, that self-love will make men partial to themselves and their friends: and on the other side, that ill nature, passion and revenge will carry them too far in punishing others; and hence nothing but confusion and disorder will follow, and that therefore God hath certainly appointed government to restrain the partiality and violence of men.” *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), § 13.

3. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, act 5, sc. 2.

people, no “common Power to keep them all in awe,” life is a war zone spent in fear and isolation with no possibility of cultivating a flourishing human life:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.⁴

The apostle Paul told the young pastor Timothy that Christians should pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim. 2:2).

In attempting to secure that peace, government can either do its job and only its job, or try to do everything. If it fails to accomplish even what is minimally expected of it, we call it a *failed state* or *anarchy*, which, practically speaking, is no government at all. When it tries to control people far beyond what is necessary for the liberty of that quiet and godly life, it is called *totalitarianism*, an especially oppressive form of tyranny or unjust government.⁵ When government does the

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1968), 186.

5. Karl Wittfogel distinguishes despotism from totalitarianism. Merely despotic government has total power, but cannot, for practical reasons, exercise total control. Modern technology overcomes these practical limitations that constrained the despot’s limitless desire for domination and thus to control every aspect of human life. Totalitarianism thus combines total power with technologically enabled total control. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), chaps. 4, 5.

job for which God designed it, and only that, people are able to live in security, peace, and freedom. When government goes beyond that and tries to do what people ought to do for themselves, whether individually or together as families, local communities, and churches or in voluntary association with one another, people are reduced to slavery, infantile dependence, and constant danger.⁶ When government exercises either no control or total control, people are exposed to terrible danger. Keeping government within the bounds of this virtuous mean⁷ requires a politically educated and vigilant citizenry.

Fourth, politics is important because we were made not for ourselves but for one another—and for God—in love. This life of love begins in the family into which, necessarily, everyone is born and in which we are nurtured in love and learn how to love. It broadens from there into friendships and circles of friends in which we learn more deeply how to devote and deny ourselves and, in so doing, to find ourselves. The broader community that protects and enables these relationships of love, the political community, is, in its healthy form, an extended relationship of civic friendship, thin but real. Like its more intimate counterparts, it calls us to noble and ennobling love and sacrifice. Politics is about love because it is about life together that at every level, without love, is tragically diminished. In that sense, with love, relationships are political; without love, they are subpolitical, submoral, merely economic.

Fifth, politics is important because it shapes the way people see everything. A democratic people has a distinctly democratic view of family, religion, education—everything. Parents try to be “friends” with their children and cannot imagine telling them whom they

6. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the first encyclical in the modern tradition of Roman Catholic social doctrine, makes this point in section 14. “The contention, then, that the civil government should at its option intrude into and exercise intimate control over the family and the household is a great and pernicious error.” *Makers of Modern Christian Social Thought: Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper on the Social Question*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2016).

7. Aristotle described moral virtue (Greek: ἀρετή, *areté*—the excellence of a thing with regard to its nature) as a mean between two extremes of vice. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.6 (1106a15–1107a25).

can or cannot marry. Democratic people think that churches should compete in a marketplace and that people should not be bound by church authority. They take it as a given that higher education should be widely accessible and should fit people with useful skills. And they may be correct in all of this. But family life, religion, and education among politically aristocratic, communist, and tribal peoples will accordingly reflect and support those respective political orders. It follows, therefore, that Christians should understand politics Christianly so that the way in which they think about God, themselves, and the world is biblically informed or at least not misshapen by competing and erroneous views.

Politics is important because life is important. Freedom and slavery, liberty and tyranny, hang in the balance. For this reason, understanding political life—the moral authority, divine purpose, and perennial problems of government—is the obligation of every citizen in both the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men and of every political leader who aspires beyond mere office-holding to providing the blessings of statesmanship.

Why the specifically Christian study of politics? If politics is something we share with our non-Christian neighbors and if it is common to all human beings in every time and place, why should a secular study not suffice? God gives government worldwide. Politics is a blessing and mercy that God gives to all, like sunshine and rain, to the just and the unjust alike. Thus, people in their life together are governable by simply rational standards, by general revelation, God's self-disclosure to people in all places and in every age by rational reflection on the creation.

Biblical (or *special*) revelation, however, clarifies that teaching and amplifies it. Augustine described “two cities”—the city of man and the city of God—that, though distinct, are nonetheless intermingled until the judgment day identifies and separates the children of darkness and the children of light. The two cities have various commonalities. They enjoy natural goods in common. They share the same space. They feel the same needs: they thirst, they hunger, they marry and work. They recognize a common interest in clean water, safe streets, and the lawful administration of government. But they have different loves, different

lords, different ends.⁸ It stands to reason that a Christian, recognizing a different authority and hoping in a different end, would have a different understanding of political life, which pertains to authority and the proper ends for which that authority is exercised.

Readers should note that this book is not a guidebook for the political battlefield, a handbook for combat in policy wars. It is neither a history of politics nor an instruction manual for the operations of government. Rather, it is an initial exploration of the nature of political life itself, an introduction to the fundamental questions and challenges of political life. It asks: What are human beings who populate political life? What is the nature of the universe in which political life happens? (Chapter 1, “The Kingdom of God: The Theological Framework for Political Life.”) What is the source of authority, that is, what gives anyone the right to rule? (Chapter 2, “The Authority of Government: The Divine Foundation of Political Life.”) What gives anyone the right to rebel against rulers, if at all? (Chapter 10, “The Problem of Government: Submission and Resistance.”) What is the purpose of government? Is there a common good, and if so, what is it? Are there limits to what government and law can do in securing it? (Chapters 3–7, “The Purpose of Government,” etc.) If political life is so natural and government is so necessary, why is it all so fraught with problems, even terrible dangers? Is it possible for government to be both effective and safe? What is the basis, if any, for political equality, and what is the nature and value of liberty? How are these two principles related to each other? Are they compatible? Is *rights* a legitimately Christian concept, and if so, what are they and how are they grounded? (Chapter 9, “The Problem of Government and the Christian Response.”) These questions are, at their heart, human questions—those that the most thoughtful human beings in any age or place ask when they reflect seriously on the nature and difficulty of our life together. But there are also questions that came to light only with the fuller understanding of our condition that biblical revelation brought, questions concerning reason and revelation, civic and church

8. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 14.1, 4, 28, 35; 18.54; 19.17.

authority, the kingdoms of man and the kingdom of God. (Chapter 10, “The Problem of Government: Submission and Resistance.”)

The book should not be mistaken, however, for an introduction to political theory. It is intended to speak more directly to the citizen encounter with political life. Nonetheless, as an introduction to the Christian understanding of politics, the book is theologically and philosophically informed. Without a coherent understanding of Creator and creation, human nature, human calling, and human limitations, one is bound to labor under the handicap of disconnected opinions informed by contradictory influences. The discussion that follows in these pages should save the reader from having, as the saying goes, a great many opinions that, taken together, do not add up to a point of view.

In considering these great questions, the book directs interested readers not only to helpful biblical and theological resources to aid in deeper study, but also to the greatest teachers and the great conversation that has preceded us and can include us: the conversation between Jerusalem and Athens, and even within Jerusalem, drawing on theologians from Augustine and Aquinas to Martin Luther and John Calvin to Abraham Kuyper, Pope Leo XIII, and C. S. Lewis, and philosophers from Aristotle to Hobbes, Locke, and Kant to Milton Friedman, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Robert George.

I do not draw a sharp distinction between political theory and political theology. In the medieval tradition of Christian political thought, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas were philosophic theologians and theological philosophers. The Christian student of politics regards the Bible as the ultimate authority in all matters, human and divine, including philosophic reflection. Any Christian political theory, therefore, must also necessarily be a political theology. At the same time, theology, being a contemplative activity, must necessarily proceed by philosophical thinking, or *theoria*, of some sort. Any self-described political theologian who writes consciously in contradistinction to the political theorist is inevitably incorporating some unconsciously imbibed political theory.

Still, those who take politics seriously and who wish to understand it wisely know that politics is also limited in importance. The

totalitarian temptation of this past century, which is the modern utopian temptation that will no doubt tempt us in the future, was the view that the political horizon is the human horizon, that there is no transpolitical, and thus that within that horizon we can find peace and happiness. Thomas Paine expressed this uniquely modern hope when he assured us:

We have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand.⁹

A proper understanding of life's broader context—God's creation, man's fall, and Christ's redemption—removes this temptation. C. S. Lewis spoke to this matter in his great essay "Learning in War-Time":

The rescue of drowning men is, then, a duty worth dying for, but not worth living for. It seems to me that all political duties (among which I include military duties) are of this kind. A man may have to die for our country, but no man must, in any exclusive sense, live for his country.¹⁰

Politics is worth dying for, but not worth living for. The wise Christian is careful not to seek by political means what can be accomplished only by God through the Holy Spirit applying the redemptive work of Christ, and not, as theologians say, to immanentize the eschaton.

But *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*—though it addresses fundamental questions, the timeless and morally most pressing issues—is limited in what it can do. It does not address all questions, or even all the great and historically most perplexing questions, such as the tension between the individual and the community, the allure of glory, the

9. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London: Penguin, 1986), 120.

10. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 47.

relationship between philosophy and politics and between science and democracy, technology and liberty. Some things the book can address, other things it can only indicate as worthy of addressing, and many things must be passed over in silence. But in its pages, the reader will find clarifying distinctions, useful conceptual tools, and accounts of illuminating discussions, both historical and original, that help make sense of political life and equip one for love of civic neighbor, whether as citizen or as statesman.

Key Terms

anarchy
general revelation
immanentize the eschaton
special revelation
subpolitical
totalitarianism
transpolitical
tyranny
virtue

1

The Kingdom of God: The Theological Framework for Political Life

*“A prince therefore should have no other object, no other thought,
no other subject of study than war, its rules and disciplines;
this is the only art for a man who commands.”
(Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 14)*

*“Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to
ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who
wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that
knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.”
(Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 15)¹*

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen. 1:1)

*“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the
LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8)*

WHAT POLITICS IS, and thus what wisdom requires for navigating our way together in that shared life, depends on what we are and the nature of this world in which we find ourselves. If we were simply

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

individuals in an ungoverned, unsympathetic, and thus fundamentally dangerous universe, like isolated pieces on a chessboard, as Aristotle put it,² then Machiavelli's counsel in *The Prince* would be correct. All of life would be warfare, and the successful human being would live beyond judgments of good and evil, securing himself without regard to the liberty or life of others. The world would be a sophisticated jungle and all talk about justice nothing but a scam.

So from a political standpoint, it is profoundly significant that "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Because God—the sovereign, wise, and good Yahweh—created the world, governs the world, is redeeming the world through Christ, and will one day judge the world, political life has order and meaning. Behind and above all kingdoms of men, all political life everywhere and in every age, is the creative and majestic sovereignty of God. It is from Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that all rule originates, and it is his rule that stands behind all human rule. His rule gives meaning to our rule. It also gives meaning to our suffering under misrule.

For every king, if he is indeed a king, there is a kingdom, and every ruler has a realm. So it should come as no surprise that the central theme of biblical revelation and the matter of chief importance in human history is the *kingdom of God*. This term is not used in the Old Testament, but the idea is developed and described throughout, starting with the creation of the world and ending with the fall of Israel in 2 Kings 25.

The Bible opens with God's sovereignly creating the world, creating man in his image as vice-regent, and setting him in and over the world with regal dominion (Gen. 1:26–28). Man's fall into sin was rebellion against God's kingly authority (2:16–17; 3:4–6). In the course of redemption, God chose a people and eventually gave them a king through whom he mediated his blessings. That king, especially David and Solomon, anticipated the Messiah-King, who would usher in the kingdom of God in its fullness.

2. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1.2.

From the very start of Israel's history, we see movement toward this culmination of divine empire. When Moses gave the law, he gave directions for what would one day be Israel's king (Deut. 17:14–20). For the time being, however, God was Israel's King, ruling through the judges (1 Sam. 8:7). During the period of the judges, from Joshua to Samuel, Israel's obedience was judged by their behavior as a whole people. Under the kings, from Saul until the exile, their obedience was mediated through the king. The nation's blessings turned on whether the king "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD" (e.g., 1 Kings 15:5).³ The king was not only a ruler, but also a mediator between God and his people, though often an unfaithful one. This arrangement anticipated the great Mediator-Messiah-King, Jesus, who earned blessings for his people not only by his perfectly faithful life, but also by his faithful, sacrificial death on the cross (Heb. 2:17; 4:15; 5:8–10).

This kingdom of God is the substance of the gospel. At the start of Jesus' ministry, we find him preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; also Matt. 4:17). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refers to "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43). The parables are called *parables of the kingdom*. Jesus introduces many of them with words to this effect: "The kingdom of God is like . . ." (e.g., 13:18, 20). The miracles that Jesus performed were signs of the power and meaning of the kingdom. In Luke, when some accused Jesus of casting out demons by Satan's power, Jesus drew their attention to the arrival

3. In the book of Judges, the refrain "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" refers to the people of Israel (Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1; cf. 1:28; 2:2–3). Toward the end of Judges, the text states four times that "there was no king in Israel" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The first time and in the final verse we read immediately following this, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). After the middle two references, there follows an account of a moral abomination. Later, in 1 and 2 Kings, the phrase "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" always refers to the king (1 Kings 11:6; 15:26, 34; 16:19, 25, 30, etc.), with the exception of 1 Kings 14:22, where it describes Judah. Seven times in 2 Kings 13–15 the text makes a point of mentioning the king's accountability for causing the people to sin (2 Kings 14:24: "He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin").

of the kingdom of God that these wonders indicate: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? . . . But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (11:17–18, 20).⁴ The second petition of the model prayer that Jesus gave his disciples, what we call the *Lord’s Prayer*, is “Your kingdom come” (11:2).

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion, he rode in on a donkey, in this way claiming the kingly office of Israel’s Messiah (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:1–5). The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus’ claim to kingship by robing him in purple and crowning him with thorns. At the trial, Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18:33), to which Jesus replied that he was. The charges against Jesus posted over his head on the cross read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (19:19). After the resurrection, Jesus’ ascension into heaven ended with his session at the right hand of the Father, signifying dominion and glory. The book of Revelation pictures Jesus as leading the armies of heaven, judging and making war, and ruling the nations with a rod of iron, and calls him “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:11–16; cf. Ps. 2:7–9). Accordingly, in the final verse at the end of the book of Acts, Luke describes the apostle Paul as “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

Within the kingdom narrative, the broad sweep of biblical revelation as well as of human history can be summarized most fundamentally as creation, fall, and redemption. In this three-stage redemptive-historical development, we see God’s establishment of the kingdom, man’s rebellion against the kingdom, and God’s subsequent, gradual, but nonetheless certain restoration and consummation of the kingdom.

4. C. S. Lewis calls the miracles of Jesus “the various steps of a strategically coherent invasion—an invasion which intends complete conquest and ‘occupation.’” *Miracles* (1947; repr., Glasgow: Collins-Fount, 1974), 112.

The Kingdom of Creation

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Gen. 1:1–5)

The Bible introduces the kingdom theme⁵ at the very outset of Genesis. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), and he did so with ease. He spoke, and worlds came into being. The universe is thus fully responsive to his bidding, what is called his *decretive will*.⁶ He is the universal Sovereign. This is the consistent teaching of the Bible. The Psalms tell us, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps. 115:3). In Romans, Paul proclaims that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). God made the world *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing," so there is nothing he cannot do (that is, consistent with his perfections), nothing he does not know, nothing before him or exceeding him in power and glory. The radical *ex nihilo* nature of God's fundamental

5. For such a fundamentally important theme, the kingdom of God is given surprisingly little attention among Bible-believing Christians. Even among those who do give it the attention it deserves, there is remarkable disagreement over what it means. For a review of this debate, read Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004). See also John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (1981; repr., Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994); George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *The Kingdom of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

6. Westminster Shorter Catechism question 7: "What are the decrees of God?" Answer: "The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass."

creative act indicates not only his power, but also his legitimate and incontestable authority over all things.

The six-day account of God's creative work (Gen. 1) indicates that the universe is directed not only sovereignly, but also intelligently. God created by speaking. The apostle John tells us that he created through the *logos*, a Greek word with a wide lexical range, meaning everything from "word" and "announcement" to "reason" and "argument" (John 1:1–3).⁷ Naming suggests understanding, which in turn implies intelligibility. It was a rational being who brought an intelligible and rationally ordered universe into being. The creation, in turn, proclaims its Creator:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge. (Ps. 19:1–2;
cf. Rom. 1:20)

So no matter what storms tear across the world—whether meteorological or political—they happen within a larger context of order and purpose. Indeed, that higher, perfect rule informs our understanding of human rule and ought to inform the rulers themselves (Dan. 4:27). "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just" (Prov. 8:15). Conscientious rulers look to the King of kings for direction and blessing (Ps. 2:10). Otherwise, political rule is just selfish domination.

Not only is God's cosmic government intelligent and intelligible, it is also benevolent. At each stage of his creative work, God announces that what he has done is good. There are no hundred-handed warring gods that could take over the universe.⁸ *Night of the Living Dead* and

7. William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 303.

8. "And still other children were born to Gaia and Ouranos, three sons, big and powerful, so great they could never be told of, Kottos, Briareos, and Gyes, overmastering children. Each had a hundred intolerably strong arms bursting out of his shoulders, and on the shoulders of each grew fifty heads, above their massive bodies." Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 147–60, in *The Works and Days, Theogony, The Shield of*

Zombie Apocalypse cannot happen. There will be no war of the worlds or body snatchers. But not only is God good in general, he is personally good to his faithful human creation. David sang with calm delight, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). The apostle Paul echoed this, assuring the church that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Meredith Kline calls the Pentateuch a “kingdom prologue,” and this is apparent in the structure of the six-day account.⁹ The pattern of the account fits the book’s theological purpose. On day 4, God created the sun and the moon, and he appointed them “to rule over the day and over the night” (Gen. 1:16).

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. (Gen. 1:14–19)

This is oddly political language to describe inanimate objects. It is not just “language they used back then,” a thoughtless idiomatic expression.

Herakles, trans. Richard Lattimore (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 132.

9. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (1981–86; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006). There are several theories of what this means. Some (merely a myth; theistic evolution) are outside the bounds of biblical orthodoxy. Others (gap theory, day-age theory, framework hypothesis, literal six-day creation) have textual strengths and weaknesses, but in my judgment the literal six-day view has the fewest problems and the greatest strengths. For a debate among advocates of the three most prominent views, see David G. Hagopian, ed., *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation* (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press, 2001).

There is no mention of the birds and fish ruling the sky and sea or of the beasts ruling the land. It is implied, underscoring the writer's thoughtful use of the expression.

This paradoxical language draws attention to the underlying political theme so that when the language of rule shows up again at the end of the creation account in connection with human beings, the observant reader will look for a pattern. And a pattern there is! The first three days describe three "realms" followed by the "rulers" of those realms in days 4 to 6. The final creation, man, is the comprehensive ruler. God gives man charge over all realms and rulers.

Realms	Rulers
Day 1—light and darkness	Day 4—sun, moon, and stars ("rule" the day, the night)
Day 2—waters and sky	Day 5—fish and birds
Day 3—dry land	Day 6—beasts + man (rules over all the creation)

Of course, though the sun, the birds, and the beasts do not literally rule, human beings do. The theological purpose behind structuring the account in this way is to underscore the kingdom character of God's creation, of God's revelation, and of man's calling in God's service. Moses is writing this for Israel as they depart Egypt after four hundred years of slavery in a foreign land. Over the course of this time of bondage, they have forgotten who God is, who they are, and what God expects of them. So in this creation account, Moses establishes a kingdom context for the events that follow: God's rule over creation and man's special place in it.¹⁰

10. This interpretation of the Genesis 1 six-day account is known as the *framework hypothesis*. It was first offered by Dutch scholar Arie Noordzij in 1924 but came

What Moses is teaching every student of politics, and every citizen everywhere, is that human life is fundamentally a political life of the noblest order. We are created to be subjects in God's kingdom, holding high office of universal scope. For this reason, our civic life is central to our calling as human beings. Government is embedded in the cosmos itself. Political life is good because government is part of the created order.

The Image of God

The language of government shows up again in the creation of man on the sixth day. Though God created man on the same day that he created the beasts, man is clearly distinct from the beasts. God made man unique among all the creatures by doing something that he did not do in any of the previous acts of creation: he made man—both male and female—“in his own image” (Gen. 1:27; cf. 26a).¹¹ The literal meaning of the word *image* in Hebrew and Greek (Hebrew: **צֶלֶם**, *tselem*; Greek: εἰκὼν, *eikōn*), as it is in English, is “something that looks like something else.” Unlike the beasts, which by inference “rule” the land, man is given rule over everything, all the realms taken together. He is not only king of beasts; he is—under God—master of the universe.

Because the text mentions these two attributes in close succession—image-bearer and emperor—it suggests an important connection between them, that is, between the image of God in man and his

to English-speaking biblical studies through N. H. Ridderbos's *Is There a Conflict between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957). Though this reading is often embraced by advocates of theistic evolution, a position I reject as incompatible with the biblical account of things, I believe it is compatible with understanding God to have made all things in literally six days, as the original audience would have understood him to have done from a plain reading of the text.

11. The prevailing views of the *imago dei* have been the metaphysical view (man's rationality and liberty that distinguish him from the beasts), the ethical view (man's original righteousness), and the royal/functional view (vice-regency). For a survey and exploration of the idea, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

function as vice-regent over the creation. In the ancient Near East, kings were understood to represent their gods. The phrase *image of God* alludes to that understanding but universalizes kingship, or dominion, to the whole human race. These kings would also erect statues—images—of themselves throughout their realm to mark their sovereign reach. Their ambassadors were also known as the king’s “images.”¹² So when God told the Hebrews, who had grown unfamiliar with Abraham’s religion during their four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, that human beings are made in the image of God for dominion, they would have immediately understood the nexus of these ideas: human beings were made to mediate God to the creation as vice-regents, as markers of his government and ambassadorial agents of his rule.

The reference to male and female affirms that this universalization of image and kingship is truly universal: it includes women. Likeness is added to distinguish clearly between God and human beings.¹³ Though made in the image of God, the human creatures are nonetheless creatures. Though representatives, they are nonetheless radically subordinate.

But given how the New Testament writers use the phrase, there must be more to the *imago dei* than simply dominion or vice-regency. The apostle Paul writes, “Put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). At first glance, there does not appear to be any reference to dominion. And to many, the terms *righteousness* and *holiness* may even appear synonymous. But consider what was called holy in the Old Testament: priests, artifacts in the temple, and the nation of Israel itself. They were all set apart for particular divine use. The emphasis is on a special activity. Thus, righteousness and holiness correspond with being and action, respectively. God’s human creatures are to be righteous in their character and holy in their calling. With these terms, therefore, Paul is referring to what people were made to be and where they are supposed to go with it.

12. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (1961; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1972), 60.

13. Bruce Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 66.

What else does God do at all times but rule his creation? He “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3).¹⁴

Thus, God made us in his image to be like him in his character and to act like him in his place, to be righteous and to rule. God, in telling man to “have dominion,” made him in a derivative sense supreme ruler over all creation. In short, we are to be faithful vice-regents or stewards. But man cannot faithfully do God’s ruling work without faithfully mirroring God’s moral attributes. Thus, man was created in the image of God not only to rule the creation but also to be righteous in doing so. The righteousness is essential to the rule. If there were no righteousness, any efforts at rule would be forms of rebellion.

The other New Testament reference to the *imago dei* refers to Christ, who Paul declares is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). In Romans 8, he says that Christians in their sanctification are being conformed to the image of Christ. Jesus himself told his disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Whatever the image of God in man is, we see it perfectly in Jesus, the perfect man, who is fully God and fully human. But what does this mean? The Bible calls Jesus Savior and Lord. He can be Savior only because he was sinless. He can be Lord only because he is sovereign. In his sinless moral perfection, he was righteous. As Sovereign Lord, he rules. Thus, when God made Adam and Eve in his image, he made them for righteousness and rule, as he did all other human beings, even after the fall. Since man’s fall into sin, the image has been marred, but not removed.

Because of who God is in his Trinitarian fullness, the political character of the *imago* has a further dimension. The dominion to which human beings are enjoined as vice-regents is a communal enterprise. The God who created all things is one God (“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” Deut. 6:4) but, without becoming a plurality of gods, exists in three coeternal, consubstantial persons—God

14. Thomas Aquinas makes this distinction: “Looking at the world as a whole, there are two works of God to be considered: the first is creation; the second, God’s government of the things created.” Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship: To the King of Cyprus*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), § 97.

the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—equal in power and glory. He is, in the words of the Athanasian Creed, “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity.” For this reason, the apostle John says not only that God loves, but that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The three persons of the Godhead love one another perfectly and consistently. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit. The Son loves the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit loves the Father and the Son. They are thus always, as it were, a community of love in perfect unity.

Because we were created in the image of this God, we were thus created for love and, accordingly, for family, friendship, and broader community. This is why we long to be loved with a faithful and unconditional love, and why we are miserable insofar as this eludes us. This is why our hearts long for an object of love that is adequate to the longing we find within us. For this reason, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) opened his *Confessions* with the words of his prayer: “Yet man, this part of your creation, wishes to praise you. You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁵ This is why the fulfillment of God’s law for human beings is love: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30–31). Aristotle could see our fundamentally political nature, but he could not see why we have that nature. We are made for love and friendship, and thus for spiritually healthy relationships and community with one another, but ultimately with our Creator, God himself. Observed most simply, this is why we feel good when we show kindness even to a stranger: for example, when you alert someone that she has left her umbrella behind as she is getting off a bus. This is why someone with no friends, no family, no one to trust—a tyrant, for example—is the most miserable of human beings.¹⁶

On this point, it is interesting to note that we begin our lives

15. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

16. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s picture of the lonely, miserable Josef Stalin in his novel *In the First Circle*, chap. 19, “The Birthday Hero” (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

physically connected to another human being, generated from the union of two people of complementary different sorts who are, properly speaking, united in love. Each generation is generated literally out of the previous one. A healthy infant requires not only food but also love—physical touch and cooing displays of affection. We are born into families, which are small communities, and we are formed there into morally functional adults who are able, in turn, to form families and bring forth and form the next generation, and so on. When this breaks down, everything breaks down.

So with a view to the creation mandate, the fundamental obligation of every human creature, God commanded Adam to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). This was necessary not only for the sheer numbers that subduing the earth would require, but also for the sake of constituting godly, robust communities—beginning in the family but extending to the economically and socially diversified nation—in which dominion-takers would be formed morally and equipped vocationally. The work of dominion would also require, by the very nature of the work, that people function in large part as communities.

The Creation Mandate

Following upon this image, God calls Adam and his descendants to “have dominion” or “rule” over the creation:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over

the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28)

It is actually a fourfold divine instruction that God gives to Adam: multiply, fill, subdue, and rule. Theologians call this the *creation mandate*.¹⁷ The need for intervention of this sort is apparent from the start. God could have created the world immediately, complete with every perfection, but he stayed his hand. Genesis 1:2 tells us that after God’s initial creative act, the earth was formless (*tohu*) and empty (*bohu*), unformed and unfilled, uninhabitable and uninhabited.¹⁸ After the initial *ex nihilo* creation, the *creatio prima* or the first stage of creation, God then proceeded to the *creatio secunda*.¹⁹ In six days of fiat, he made the earth habitable for man, but only so far, only tolerably so. When he created man out of the dust of the ground, the world was still a wilderness. The ground was not rich, black topsoil. It was literally dust. God then formed a garden in the untamed wilderness and placed the man there with a mandate: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over [it]” (Gen. 1:28). The command to subdue and rule parallels the first description of the newly created world: formless or uninhabitable (*tohu*). The command to multiply and fill parallels the second description: that it was void, that is, uninhabited (*bohu*).²⁰ The blessing that God bestows on Adam and his descendants immediately before he announces the creation mandate (“And God blessed them,” v. 28) indicates the moral righteousness that constitutes, along with rule, the image of God.

The implication in all of this is clear. God has commissioned his image-bearers to continue his work of creation, further forming and

17. Most helpful in understanding the creation mandate, also called the *cultural* or *dominion mandate*, is Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). The notion was first developed by Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg, MB: Premier, 1977) (originally published in Dutch in 1948), and later popularized in Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959).

18. Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 57.

19. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 21.

20. *Ibid.*, 42.

elaborating what he has left yet unformed and undeveloped in a godly, thousand-generation *creatio tertia*, or third and continuing stage of creation. This cultivation of what is latent in the creation goes by various names: *discovery, invention, culture*. In the Bible, we first see it in Genesis 4 among the descendants of Cain:²¹

Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. (Gen. 4:20–22)

In modern times, we have been applying reason to the explication of the creation with a view to useful inventions for what Francis Bacon (1561–1626) called “the relief of man’s estate.”²² George Washington Carver (1864–1943) is a notable example of this. The American inventor created 325 products from the humble peanut, over 100 products from sweet potatoes, and hundreds more from soybeans and other plants. He was mediating the goodness of God’s creation to the world.

But dominion is about more than just the development of creature comforts. It is also, and perhaps fundamentally, about intellectual dominion, understanding the creation, or, as the astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) said, “thinking God’s thoughts after him.” Even

21. The first people to give themselves fruitfully to those labors were not in the righteous line of Seth, but the ungodly line of Cain. Indeed, they are the children of Lamech, the murderous megalomaniac who was the first bigamist and yet who gave us the first recorded poem in the Bible. The sons of this brute originate music, metallurgy, architecture, and animal husbandry. The godly, by contrast, start calling on the name of Yahweh. That is, they turn their attention to deepening their worship life (Gen. 4:26). We learn from this, first, that the Lamechites were a sign of God’s superabounding mercy on his human creation and that we still have much to gain, by God’s common grace, from the treasures of wisdom, art, and invention to be found among those who are ignorant of Scripture and strangers to Christ. We learn, second, that we should first give ourselves to the improvement of our souls and taking hold of God firmly in love if we are to develop those cultural enterprises as God most fully intends them, that is, with Christian understanding and loving application.

22. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147–48.

inventions come only from properly understanding the creation. But language itself is a kind of dominion, an ability to articulate logically what things are and their relation to one another and to the whole. So Adam began his life, under God's direction, by naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20). Lamech is the first recorded poet in the Bible (4:23–24). The dominion of understanding—whether philosophic, scientific, or poetic—is not only for use and pleasure, but also for glory and worship (Ps. 8). This dominion theme continues in the New Testament. Paul enjoins the church to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). This book and the reader's use of it are themselves forms of dominion-taking.

The reader of Genesis is, however, left with a mixed message. Where is the focus of man's attention and activity to be? Should his focus be in the garden, working and keeping it (Gen. 2:15), or should it be global in scope, filling the earth and taking dominion over it? The answer, of course, is “both.” The descendants of Adam were to use the garden as a model for subduing the whole earth. Genesis 2 specifies that God made Adam before he made the garden. That is, he made him in the midst of the wilderness, and only then placed him in the garden. The order is clear and purposeful. By the time Adam arrived in the garden, he was already familiar with the wilderness of the world. So when God said to have dominion over the garden and the whole earth, Adam knew what that meant, namely, to make the earth look like the beautiful, fruitful, and well-ordered garden.

But this mandate is about far more than agriculture. Man's dominion is to be a holy dominion. The garden that God wants universalized is also a temple.²³ In the center of the garden was the Tree of Life. This anticipates the golden eight-armed candlestick in the tabernacle and in Solomon's temple. The temple was decorated with pomegranates and lilies. These features, like every other feature of the temple, were made according to God's specific command. They suggest a garden!

23. Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 85. For a book-length treatment of this fascinating theme, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

But they were not just for beautification. The temple looks back to the garden of Eden, which was itself a temple, as well as forward to the promised redemption in Christ, in addition to being the very present place of God's dwelling with his people. Wherever God is, that is a temple. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). He was referring to his body, which was a temple because it housed God himself. The Scriptures refer to the Christian as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), as well as the church as a whole (2 Cor. 6:16). The book of Revelation presents the new heaven and the new earth as a temple because there God dwells with his people (Rev. 21–22).

Yet God does not tell man to lie low in the garden, but to fill the earth. Genesis draws attention to the rivers that flow out of the garden in every direction, highways for travel into the broad beyond. Adam and his seed are to use the garden as a model and extend it to cover the whole earth. Adam, with the help of Eve and their progeny, is to make the whole of God's earth also God's temple (cf. Rev. 21). This vision recurs throughout the Bible. The prophet Habakkuk, looking forward to the eschatological kingdom, foretells that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; see also Isa. 11:9). The Great Commission restates this goal: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The Christian's work is to cover the earth with the church, which is the temple of God. Thus, God's command to Adam—the creation mandate—is not primarily about agriculture, but about discipleship and dominion: the flourishing of all of God's creation, both human and nonhuman; the Christian discipleship of souls and godly dominion—both intellectual and physical—over the earth.

The Fall

But we can see that the history of God's creation has not been simply a record of the spread of Adam's godly, multiplying descendants across the globe in world-transforming worship, faithfully mediating God's good government. Soon after the creation came the fall.

Graeme Goldsworthy describes the fall as “the outcome of man’s unilateral declaration of independence” from God’s divine Creator authority.²⁴ The fall profoundly disrupted all human relationships, most fundamentally between man and God, but then as a consequence also among human beings. This disruption was initially between man and woman, but then also between human beings and their environment, the physical world.²⁵ This is not to say that the creature robbed the Creator of his omnipotence. R. C. Sproul remarks that if even one atom is outside of God’s sovereign control, then God is no longer God.²⁶ Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredricks distinguish, however, between God’s universal kingdom and his particular kingdom.²⁷ God’s sovereign rule extends from the angelic heights of heaven to the demonic depths of hell: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Ps. 139:8). He exercises this sovereign control at all times simply by virtue of being God the Creator. But that is God’s universal kingdom. His particular kingdom, which comes into being only with his creation of Adam, is what Goldsworthy calls “the sphere of God’s rule in which his creatures submit willingly to his righteous rule.”²⁸ Waltke and Fredricks call it “the realm in which his subjects obey *ex animo* his law.”²⁹ This is what Adam overthrew in his rebellion at the fall, and what God has been foreshadowing, unfolding, and establishing from the beginning of the covenant of grace. It is this kingdom that Jesus announced in his ministry, inaugurated in his death and resurrection, and will consummate at his return. Adam’s sin affected God’s particular kingdom, but not his universal kingdom. God is still actively King over the creation as a whole. Indeed, it is only by virtue of his universal sovereignty that he can restore the particular kingdom.

But though sin has marred the image of God in us, it has not

24. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 51.

25. *Ibid.*, 52.

26. R. C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand: Do All Things Really Work for Good?* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 157.

27. Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 45.

28. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 52.

29. Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 45. Cf. Ezek. 36:26–27.

removed it. Adam's sin was original sin that gave him and everyone who has descended from him by ordinary generation a predisposition to sin—indeed, an inability not to sin. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags,” says Isaiah (Isa. 64:6 KJV). Man is not free; he is a slave to sin. Among these and other things, the fall incapacitated the human race for godly dominion, that is, for righteousness and rule. Humans could still develop the creation, but that cultivation would not be in obedience as vice-regents, it would not be for God's glory, and the fruits of it would not be used in moral obedience. It would be domination, not dominion.

One expression of man's deadness toward God resulting from original sin is what is called the *noetic effects of the fall*, the effects of sin on the mind. This dimension of sin affects people's understanding of, and even willingness to accept, God's Word in any form. God's saving grace in Christ is necessary to correct this inability. Man's understanding of, and willingness to accept, the dictates of reason in general is also affected. God addresses this particular noetic effect of sin by his common grace, the restraining and enabling grace that he gives to all people everywhere and at all times in various measures.

Redemption

Divine redemption is the history of God's putting down the rebellion of sin and reestablishing his particular kingdom. “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25). That is, redemption is about the kingdom of God. For this reason, Jesus announces the day of redemption, saying that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15), and Luke identifies the gospel with the kingdom (Acts 28:31). In redemption, Christ is restoring our ability to accomplish Adam's task, our capacity for dominion, for faithful vice-regency, for righteousness and rule. He is restoring us to love as we were created to love with all our natural abilities and all the wealth of creation that our labors—of both head and hand—discover and develop.

But the advance of Christ's kingdom is not an earthly political

agenda, simply a function of community organizing or the fruit of educational reform.³⁰ Christ's kingdom is called a "new creation": "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). To enter this kingdom, you must be born again (John 3:3). That second birth anticipates the new creation in general. That is the Christian hope and thus the only human hope. So there is no ultimate hope for righteous order in the kingdoms of men until Christ's kingdom is fully restored.

Though it is not civil government's function to accomplish this great Christian hope, which is also the human hope, God uses the blessings of good government to provide a helpful setting of peace and order in which he advances his kingdom work in this fallen world. With a view to this, and even just with a view simply to human decency, some political arrangements are better than others. Some are free and some tyrannical, and there are varying degrees of each of these. The exercise of power in some regimes is crueler than in others, and in some it is more restrained and decent. The Christian study of politics is therefore also concerned, out of love for neighbor, to investigate the possibilities for improving our shared life not only for the gospel's sake but also for mercy's sake. This must begin with understanding the limited authority that God has given to government and God's purpose for government in all times and places.

Key Terms

creation mandate

ex nihilo

God's particular kingdom

God's universal kingdom

image of God

imago dei

logos

30. See, for example, Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

noetic effects of the fall
vice-regent

Study Questions

1. What difference does it make to justice and morality that God—this God, Yahweh—created the world?
2. How do Jesus' death and resurrection and the kingdom of God bear on twenty-first-century government and politics?
3. How is our creation in the image of the triune God related to any person's political involvement as citizen and loving-kindness to neighbor?
4. How is politics worth dying for but not worth living for?

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