



# “Where the Kingdoms Are Held Together”: Free Institutions and the American Church’s Political Vocation

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Many churches have experienced the paralysis of contemporary political discourse. False alternatives are presented as divine mandates. Categories are confused. The boundaries between the sacred and the secular are deliberately obscured. Congregants who once sorted by confessional differences are quickly becoming distinguishable by cable news preferences. Quotidian political squabbles are preached as apocalyptic battles between good and evil. Genuine discussions are thin on the ground. With the help of social media, condemnations and anathemas fly faster than medieval inquisitions, though not as fatal. The result has not been a church that is as engaged and politically transformative as it claims and wants to be. Instead clergy and church leaders are increasingly fearful of and disappointed in one another. Some churches exhibit political pull, to be sure, but do so mainly as sieves of certain segments of public opinion rather than as genuine prophetic agents of change.

One might blame such anomie on a polarized society or on churches decreasing in size and influence because of waning religious adherence. But it might make more sense to blame all this on a loss of purpose. Churches have become so

*The United States, as any other nation, is considered a political entity that God uses as a means of providing life and happiness for all. The distinct nature of the American national system is heavily reliant on the virtue of its citizens, and Christians are called to engage in this work both as citizens of the nation and as members of God’s church.*

obsessed with retaining their power and influence over the political process that they have largely abandoned their particular calling within it. Such seduction has been costly not only for American churches themselves but also for the nation they inhabit. When the church no longer nurtures and raises up citizens to attend to their neighbors, but instead caters to popular passions, the church itself is complicit in social decay.

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The political vocation of the church pulls it in two divergent but complementary directions. As an institution charged with proclaiming the word of God in both law and gospel, the church from time to time is called to stand against earthly governments whenever they overstep their bounds and speak with God's voice while breaking God's commands. "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29). Prophetic words are necessary when the earthly government participates in social ills, and should be a regular feature of the church's advocacy for the poor and oppressed. But this prophetic call does not exhaust the church's life in this age. The church is also called to equip people to exercise their particular gifts and talents on behalf of their neighbors. Jeremiah, instructing the elders among the exiles in Babylon, made it clear that even in a hostile land, God calls us to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile . . . for in its welfare you shall find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). Authority can't take away your loyalty to God, but God won't excuse you from loyalty to your neighbors and the authorities that protect you both. Such an admonition might have been on Paul's mind when he stated that "the authorities are God's servants" (Rom 13:6). We do not allow the government to be God, but under its authority we serve God by caring for our neighbors.

Attending to the church's political vocation means policing government's limits over the hearts of its adherents, while at the same time directing those same hearts toward government's divinely charged ends of "wielding the sword" to protect the innocent and providing the means necessary for human society to flourish. So many of the paralyzing political alternatives that churches embrace emphasize the former at the expense of the latter. Christian nationalism confuses a nation's policies and its cultural symbols with God's identity. It strives to make the nation's voice God's voice by merging national mythology with biblical history. God has called the nation out and chosen it for material abundance and earthly glory. When the nation falls short of its divine destiny, it is because of those who do not invest the same faith in it as its acolytes or because self-serving elites have betrayed it. At its core, Christian nationalism is a gospel of national ascent, but

the nation remains an ideal waiting to be realized. To counter it, the opponents of Christian nationalism propose other ideals. Some do so from a more rigorous application of biblical principles with a progressive bent. Others do so from a posture of criticism and skepticism of the country's failure to live up to its stated principles and seek to radically remake it. Many of these approaches share more in common than they differ. Both privilege an ideal over a messy reality and seek the true nature of civil society in something that needs to be realized before it can be related to in good faith.

The result is that all these approaches locate the primary place in which the life of the congregation touches the life of the nation in the pulpit. There is much precedent to make such an association. From independence, through abolition, prohibition, and civil rights, American sermons have been agents of change and social solidarity. The story of American discourse from the deck of the *Arabella* to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial is largely told in preaching. But in an oversaturated media environment there is too much temptation for the preacher to become a pundit, and for conversations to focus on elections and the give-and-take of political campaigns. Bipartisan preaching is a difficult art, and no argument made in fifteen minutes can drone out the drumbeat of hours of cable news or amateur internet political commentary. Arguing about what ideal to pursue is a recipe for electioneering and for subjecting congregants to another harangue about "the most important election in our lifetime" (until the next one).

The political life of the church is not experienced solely in the pulpit. Churches inhabit spaces in particular communities. They are made up of people with particular jobs and roles. They are students, teachers, first responders, soldiers, corporate employees, writers, retail workers, entrepreneurs, and many more struggling to find a place or even just basic support in society. People in congregations pay their taxes, they serve on juries, they work for quality schools, they work on political campaigns, they volunteer, they raise families, they give to charities. All this they do to seek the welfare of a particular place because they know that its welfare is their welfare. They do not (usually) withhold their taxes until the government reflects their beliefs. They can't opt to not follow the laws without obeying their consequences. It is in such a place that they need the church. The church is a spiritual institution to the same extent it is a political institution by providing rest and worship for such people in the midst of their labors, guidance for those dealing with conflicting loyalties, a voice and support for those overlooked by the rest of their neighbors, and, most importantly, forgiveness for the sins they accrue in the messy and dangerous work of subjecting their frail consciences to the risks of being present with other human beings. The political vocation of the church is to support and care for people engaged in their various vocations, feeding them with the word of God.

The reformers stressed this by their denial of the distinction between "sacred" and "secular" callings. Melancthon lamented in the Augsburg Confession that

those who strictly adhere to monastic vows “judge that all magistracy and all civil offices are unworthy of Christians and in conflict with an Evangelical counsel.”<sup>1</sup> Earlier he had condemned “those who locate evangelical perfection not in the fear of God and in faith but in abandoning civil responsibilities.”<sup>2</sup> Civic order could no longer be described as a lower order but as a realm where trust in the gospel frees believers to be present for their neighbors. God does not “govern” the political order through the church but subjects both to his command. For this reason Melanchthon will argue in the *Apology* that while “Christ’s kingdom is spiritual . . . the heart’s knowledge of God” also “permits us to make outward use of legitimate political ordinances of whatever nation in which we live, just as it permits us to make use of medicine, or architecture, or food, drink, and air.”<sup>3</sup> He is critical of those who seek Christian perfection in vows or higher laws. For the same reason, the church should retain the same criticism of those who make their own participation contingent on national perfection. We are called to care for and improve the nation around us, not to wait for God to purify or perfect it. Such perfection belongs to the gospel which reigns in our hearts while creating the love that rules and moves our hands toward our neighbors.

The “outward use” of political ordinances makes them the arena in which our vocations are exercised. Leif Grane expounds further by incorporating Luther’s “two kingdoms” language:

The place where the two kingdoms are held together is the calling. If the kingdoms are mixed together the consequence that immediately follows is that the calling is disregarded. If one—for example the pope—attempts to make the law applicable to the spiritual kingdom, it means that works are turned upwards toward God instead of being directed toward one’s neighbor in the service of one’s calling. Thus, one shows contempt for the works demanded by one’s earthly existence. If, on the other hand, one attempts, as did the rebellious peasants, to forsake obedience, claiming the rights to do so on the basis of Christian freedom, the results are the same. The calling and its task are disregarded. The right distinction in the spiritual and the secular is maintained precisely in the person’s calling. For the love which the Christian receives from God through the gospel expresses itself nowhere other than in the works demanded by earthly existence.<sup>4</sup>

The church does not govern by discerning spiritual laws. The church blesses the world by preaching the gospel to free its hearers to serve God by following their

<sup>1</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Augsburg Confession* XXVIII:55 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>2</sup> AC XVI:4, in BC, 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* XVI:2, in BC, 231.

<sup>4</sup> Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 174.

callings. As sinners we are always tempted to envision or create a “spiritual kingdom” that more closely approximates our identities or our ideologies. But we are called to produce works that concretely impact the neighbors that we have, not the ones we want. A good political order is the result of our works, not the condition for them.

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The American political order as discussed in this issue presents an interesting problem for those reflecting on the church’s place within it. America is a unique challenge for religious people, and Christian people in particular, because so much of its imagery is borrowed from religious symbols. Rather than existing as some kind of historical accident as tribes united by ethnic bonds, customs, and conquests, America is a conglomeration of the stories, hopes, and dreams of our aspirational multinational ancestors. America also carries the stain of the demonic national sins of genocide of Native Americans and enslavement of African Americans. At our core is a creed that “all men are created equal,” which we have made bold strides toward at times, but at other times have egregiously failed to live up to. Where does the Christian story fit into this?

America is a nation which has claimed vocation as well. America’s government is founded upon preserving the dignity of those it governs. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the Declaration of Independence are understood as fundamental rights because these are gifts from God. This is the standard by which our national life is judged, even if it is quite often found wanting. The US Constitution protects these fundamental rights by raising up a legislature elected by and answerable to the people, and by including rights that the government is bound to respect, with courts sorting through their day-to-day implications. This vocation of respecting human worth and dignity does the opposite of bestowing some semi-divine status upon the nation; it appoints it with an earthly task. In short, the vocation of the American political order is to allow for the freedom and protection of people pursuing their individual vocations.

This correspondence of vocation between the American political order and Christian liberty became visible as a result of epistolary correspondence. It occurred in an exchange between a merchant named Moses Sexias and George Washington. Sexias, a warden in the Newport synagogue, joined an assemblage of Christian clergy in greeting the newly elected president during a visit in 1790. His greeting discussed the persecution of the Jewish people elsewhere in the world and praised Washington “for all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which

we enjoy under an equal and benign administration.”<sup>5</sup> Struck by these remarks, Washington responded by sending a letter to the entire synagogue a few weeks later. His words speak to the highest aspirations of the new nation:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship[.] It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.<sup>6</sup>

Washington blends here what would later come to be called “negative” and “positive” liberties. First, he addresses the rights that all citizens and groups have in the community. Eschewing language of “toleration,” in which governments simply forbear differences and indulge certain groups to exist, Washington points to a government in which “bigotry [has] no sanction” and “persecution no assistance.” This allows people of all classes and religions to “exercise . . . their inherent natural rights.” There are no castes, no hierarchies—only people “demean[ing] themselves as good citizens.” While these words have a hollow ring due to their author’s possessing other human beings as property, they point to a fundamental truth about the American political order. The freedom of people and groups exists prior to the government and is bound to be respected by the government—and that same government cannot make arbitrary distinctions. The same way Christians cannot pick which people to be neighbors to, following the example of the good Samaritan, the government can’t pick for you who is and who is not your neighbor. That this reality has not been followed in American history with its history of Jim Crow laws,

<sup>5</sup> George Washington, “From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 6, 1 July 1790–30 November 1790, ed. Mark A. Mastromarino (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 284–86.]

<sup>6</sup> Washington, “From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation.”

redlining neighborhoods, and attempts at erasing the cultural heritage of Native Americans in boarding schools does not negate the responsibility. Washington is laying a tall order here, one that he himself failed to live up to even as he celebrated it. We don't have the luxury of repeating that mistake.

Closing with the biblical image from the prophet Micah that "each shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall make him afraid" (4:4), Washington shared his favorite Bible verse and his vision of what freedom means—enjoying the fruit of your labor and sharing it with others. This is not just a "freedom to" but a "freedom for." For Washington, liberty is not just peace; it's work. Freedom means "giving [the country] on all occasions their effectual support." The project is not going to succeed unless people harness their gifts, passions, and efforts to provide and care for one another. Liberty means more than freeing people up to go their own way, but freeing them to come and work side by side with their neighbors. The vocation of the American political order is to unleash every citizen in their "several vocations" until God, "in his own due time and way," makes us "everlastingly happy."

The American political order and the vocation of the church share similar ends even if their means are distinct and must be vitally understood in this way. To use Luther's "two kingdoms" language, the American political order at its best is the left-hand kingdom comfortable being the left-hand kingdom. But it vitally needs the right hand too and the virtuous citizens that it raises up. During the debates over ratification in Virginia, the Constitution's architect, James Madison, responded to those who worried about how the correct legislators would be elected under the system as proposed. Madison stated that this would be up to the people but that they would need to be virtuous people. "To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea," he quipped.<sup>7</sup> America cannot follow its vocation if the people do not follow theirs. The most famous observer of early-nineteenth-century America, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented:

Although religion in the United States never intervenes directly in government, it must be considered as the first of America's political institutions, for even if religion does not give Americans their taste for liberty, it does notably facilitate their use of that liberty. . . . I do not know if all of them have faith in their religion—for who can read the bottom of men's hearts?—but I am certain that they believe it to be necessary for the preservation of republican institutions.<sup>8</sup>

This duty to preserve free institutions is not solely owned by the church and is shared with countless other civic, educational, and voluntary institutions which

<sup>7</sup> James Madison, *Selected Writings of James Madison*, ed. Ralph Ketcham (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 157.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 338.



inculcate what the same author called “habits of the heart.” Such gifts are vital to preserve democratic institutions by fostering social trust and creating arenas where people can be served and the entire civic structure can be improved. Many clergy are accustomed to think that their greatest political worry is Christians mounting attacks on the capitol in the name of Christian nationalism, but the real problem is further downstream in the apathy, social dislocation, and patterns of blame and resentment that foster Christian nationalism and so many other utopian schemes that turn neighbors into enemies. Political movements themselves are symptoms of this greater disease.

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America’s “chosenness” is a weighted historical, political, and theological claim which will always be, at its root, nothing more than speculation. Our nation, like any nation, is a created thing, a gift from our Creator to preserve and maintain creation. It’s the ground that enables our constant work on behalf of our neighbor, and it’s a place we can gather with our neighbors to build relationships based on loyalty and pride strongly seasoned with humility. Church leaders should be more comfortable speaking about these things without adopting a tone of idolatry or revolutionary detachment. The abdication of responsible voices in arenas which talk about patriotic ties and political vocations has only cleared ground for irresponsible voices. Churches do not get to sit on the sidelines and pine for the days when they got to call the shots (if they ever existed). The political vocation of the church is to join the work and encourage others to do so too. Our country is only as “exceptional” as we make it. This nation is “chosen” less in the sanction it claims from on high than in the daily choices of free citizens who make “outward use of their legitimate political ordinances”<sup>9</sup> to follow their callings and “secure the blessings of liberty”<sup>10</sup> for their neighbors and for their posterity. ⊕

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<sup>9</sup> AC XVI:2 in BC.

<sup>10</sup> The Preamble to the US Constitution.