

## **Biblical and Historical Perspective on Christian Citizenship**

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### Introduction

I suffer at least two liabilities in addressing citizenship from a biblical perspective. First, I have no technical training or competence in political theory or political science, and have only a layman's understanding of either. Second, however, even as someone trained in biblical studies, I am an almost-ignoramus of citizenship, because the Old Testament addresses (if at all) only participation in the Israelite theocracy, which is now defunct; and the New Testament addresses citizenship almost never: Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship when defending himself before the Roman tribune (Acts 22:28), and said to the Philippians, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," a statement that effectively denies any lasting citizenship here in our temporal existence. In what follows, then, I will attempt to supplement this meager evidence with inferences from other biblical statements about human government and our role therein.

The term "citizenship" has two uses. In the first use, it refers to the legal status that permits one to enjoy the benefits of membership in a particular state. When people "apply for citizenship," they are applying for the benefits associated with being a member of that state. In its second use, it refers to one's conduct as a citizen, and it denotes those activities one does in relation to fellow citizens. It is in this latter sense that I (and presumably many others at this conference) address the matter here; I have nothing to say about the legal questions of who qualifies for the status of citizenship.

As is often the case when Christians discuss a topic, they place the adjective "Christian" in front of it: Christian music, Christian legal societies or medical societies, etc. There is nothing inherently objectionable about this, but we need to recognize that in any such discussion, there is both an adjective *and* a noun. It is well to ask what "citizenship" is prior to asking about whether or how there can be a "Christian" approach to the same. As this paper unfolds, it has three major

sections. The first, “Theological Foundations,” establishes the creational basis for society and government, and attempts to orient citizenship within that order. The second section, “Four Views,” traces what I regard as four approaches to understanding the role of the believer in the political process, explaining why I believe two are unbiblical and two are biblical. The third section consists of some practical counsel designed for those who would wish to think of citizenship in Christian terms.

### Part One: Theological Foundations

Genesis 1 and 2 record two accounts of the creation, in each of which is contained the substance of what theologians often call the “Cultural Mandate” or “Creation Mandate.” Either term will designate the reality well, but I will employ “Cultural Mandate” here. These two chapters of Genesis give us a perspective that neither could do alone. Just as it takes two eyes to gain depth perception, so also a proper perception of God’s creational purposes for the human requires these two chapters with their respective emphases. I discuss them (in a highly abbreviated manner) here because I regard the justification of any human behavior to reside in the degree to which it conforms to the purposes for which we were made.

In Genesis 1, God made the human in his own image, and commanded the human to exercise rule over the entire created order: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over (יְרִיבֵי) 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...’ And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue (וְכִבְּדוּ) it and have dominion over (יְרִיבֵי) 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). Note that the human was given no authority (at that time) to rule other humans; God alone enjoyed that authority singly. Further, there was no *need* for human government in the state of innocence. Human government was later instituted (Gen. 9, and cf. Paul’s thoughts in Romans.

13:1-7) to suppress wickedness and protect God’s created order from the wicked; so there was no need for such an institution in the state of innocence.

Genesis 2 complements Genesis 1 in important ways, and provides a perspective that would not be attainable from Genesis 1 alone. In three particular ways Genesis 2 does this: It explains more expressly the social/cooperative nature of the human; it expresses more precisely the nature of the “dominion” the human is to exercise over the created order, and it expresses more exactly the two great properties that humans are to cultivate from that created order.

Genesis 1 had already indicated that the human was to be a social being, as is evident from the italicized words in the following citation of Gen. 1:26-28: “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....*’” The human made in God’s image is “male-and-female,” is addressed in the plural (“them”), and is told to multiply and fill the earth.

Genesis 2 echoes this social/cooperative nature of the human in an intentional way, by stretching out the creation of the human into two narratives, one each for the male and the female. It also achieves this by striking language in verse 18: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is *not good* (לֹא־טוֹב) that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” The word *good* (טוֹב) appeared seven times in Genesis 1, ordinarily in the recurring comment after each creative day that “God saw that it was good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The seventh occurrence (1:31) records divine approval of the entirety of the created order, and an important addition appears: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*” (טוֹב מְאֹד). The repeated “good” of Genesis 1 makes the “not good” of Gen. 2:18 rather stark. We could paraphrase: “Everything made so far is very good, but what would not be good at all would be a solo human, a human alone attempting to exercise dominion over this vast created order. Even as

We, the Godhead, are everlastingly Triune, therefore, so shall we make another being, in our image, and therefore, essentially a social/cooperative one.”

Genesis 2 also clarifies what sort of “dominion” the humans are to exercise over the created order. Many people (especially some of the “greener” ecologists) object to the language of Gen. 1:26-28 with its repeated mandate that the human “exercise dominion” over the other creatures. Perhaps they fear that this is an open-ended mandate for the humans to abuse the created order. Genesis 2 puts those fears to rest, by recording in two places the particular nature of the “dominion” humans are to exercise: “When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work (לַעבֹד) the ground...The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work (לְעַבְדָּהּ) it and keep (וַיִּשְׁמְרָהּ) it” (Gen. 2:5, 15). The verb employed in verse 5 appears again in verse 15, where it is augmented with another word. Most English translations employ words that suggest agricultural activity (“work,” “till,”), which is understandable in the context. In the original Hebrew, however, the repeated word is simply the common Hebrew verb *avad* (appears 317 times), ordinarily translated “to serve.” It appears many times in Genesis alone, including in texts such as these:

Gen. 14:4: Twelve years they had *served* Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled....

Gen. 15:13: Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they *serve*....’

Gen. 29:18: Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, ‘I will *serve* you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.’

Gen. 31:6: ‘You know that I have *served* your father with all my strength....’

The use of this verb suggests that whatever “exercise dominion” means, it is a form of *service to* the created order. The humans are to *serve (avad)* the created order.

The second verb (*shamar*) is also quite common in the Hebrew Bible, appearing 469 times, ordinarily translated “guard,” or “keep.” Even the wicked Cain employed it when God appeared in judgment after he had murdered his brother Abel. When God inquired about Abel, Cain said, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper (רֹשֵׁטֶת) (Gen. 4:9)? A typical usage of the term is found at Gen. 28:15: ‘Behold, I am with you and will *keep* you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.’ Even more significant is the pairing of the terms together. When paired, the two often refer to the activity of the priests:

Numbers 3:7 ‘They shall keep guard (*shamar*) over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister (*avad*) at the tabernacle. 8 They shall guard (*shamar*) all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over (*shamar*) the people of Israel as they minister (*avad*) at the tabernacle.’

Num. 8:26 ‘They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard (*shamar*), but they shall do no service (*avad*). Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties.’

Num. 18:7 ‘And you and your sons with you shall guard (*shamar*) your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve (*avad*). I give your priesthood as a gift, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.’

If Moses intentionally paired the same verbs in his discussion of the priests as he did when he described the earliest humans, then he intended that Adam and Eve were to care for the garden with the same intention and devotion with which the priests cared for the tabernacle.<sup>1</sup> Whether intentional or not, each of the terms (*avad* and *shamar*) suggests a guarding, preserving, and

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<sup>1</sup> Some biblical theologians regard creation itself as a kind of royal tabernacle, temple, or dwelling-place, in which Adam is, effectively, the first priest. Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (n.p., 1980 and 1986), and *Kingdom Prologue* (n.p., 1989); G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology Series (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004).

serving of the created order, in a manner that helps us understand what the Genesis 1 mandate (exercise dominion over) means.

The third way in which Genesis 2 augments Genesis 1 is in the description it provides of the garden's two great properties: "And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant to the sight* and *good for food*" (Gen. 2:8-9). Many interpreters agree that the garden is a microcosm of the created order in its entirety; and here the garden is spoken of as having two great properties, that it is pleasant to the sight and good for food. Many of the same interpreters regard each of these expressions as synecdoches for larger realities; the garden is pleasant to all five of the senses, not just sight. And the garden is useful for many purposes (shelter, clothing, etc.) in addition to being useful for food. So the garden had two properties: It was beautiful and useful, lovely and life-sustaining, enchanting and practical, and in that order. God is, thus, disclosed as both Artist and Artisan; and so shall be the ones made in His image. When humans "serve" or "preserve/keep/protect" such an order, they do so by discovering all its latent properties for beauty and utility. To exercise dominion over the created order, humans serve and guard that order, and promote its beauty and its utility.

This task manifestly cannot be done by single individuals acting alone. The cultural mandate is given to the human race in all its rich plurality, because that same rich plurality is necessary to make progress in such a task. Many people, therefore, just assume that governments are necessary to direct this important task. But this was not so in the garden. In the state of innocence, human life was governed directly by the divine King, without any human intermediary. The state's later role (to punish the wicked) was simply not necessary in the state of innocence, nor was its coercive power of "the sword." John M. Frame is, therefore, almost certainly mistaken when he says, "What we see in Scripture, rather, is a kind of gradual development from family authority to something which we would tend to call a state.

The borderline between family and state is not sharp or clear.”<sup>2</sup> There can be no “gradual development” from there being no wicked people to punish and there being wicked people to punish; and there can be no gradual development from the familial institution that *sustains* life to a civil institution that is authorized to *take* life. It is surely true that other societies and associations would have emerged, even in the state of innocence, apart from the family: trade associations, professional societies, food co-ops, etc. But none of these would have been given (nor have had use for) the coercive power of capital punishment, just as none of them has such power today.<sup>3</sup>

Most orthodox theologians believe that the State was instituted in Genesis 9:6. The flood has ended; Noah and his family leave the ark to return to the original creation mandate, portions of which are repeated: ‘And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it’ (Gen. 9:7). But this duty of filling the earth with humans is now threatened, because the human race has witnessed Cain’s slaying of his brother and Lamech’s bloodthirsty vengefulness (Gen. 4:8, 22-23). The two previous verses, therefore, anticipate the possibility that fratricide (and other forms of murder) may very well happen again: ‘And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man (אִדְמָה) shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.’ (Gen. 9:5-6). That is, God will no longer preserve humanity from the wicked by having forty-day floods (or by His own avenging of Abel); the human himself will be responsible to preserve the human race: ‘*by man* shall his blood be shed.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frame, “Toward a Theology of the State,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51:2 (Fall 1989): 207.

<sup>3</sup> Okay, some members of some labor unions bust someone’s head open every now and then, but this is not done officially.

<sup>4</sup> While Calvin thought the passage taught more than merely the institution of civil government, he did not deny that it taught such: “Truly I do not deny that the punishment which the laws ordain, and which the judges execute, are founded on this divine sentence; but I say the words are more comprehensive,” in Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 295. John Wesley, commenting on “by man shall his blood be shed,” said, “That is, by the magistrate.” Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown understood the matter as did Wesley: “The fourth part establishes a new power for *protecting* life—the institution of the civil magistrate (Romans 13), armed with public and official authority to repress the commission of violence and crime. Such a power had not previously existed in patriarchal society.” *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Entire Bible* (1871). John Gill had earlier referred to Genesis 9:6, saying it “seems to be the first law of this kind that

Genesis 9 (and, later, Romans 13) effectively teaches that the cultural mandate is threatened by the presence of the wicked, who might very well destroy those who would care for God's garden. Some institution, what we ordinarily call "government" or "civil government," and what theologians call "the magistrate," will be responsible to protect the innocent by suppressing the wicked. It is right, therefore, for Christians to recognize the propriety of the existence of the state; it has been instituted by God, and we should be desirous of its fulfilling its divine purpose.

In addition to the state's grim responsibility to preserve order by punishing the wicked, individual citizens have their mutual duties to one another from the original creation mandate: the duty to exercise together responsible stewardship and care for the created order. Totally apart from any question about our role in the state in its official capacity, we have many opportunities to work cooperatively with fellow humans, whether they are co-citizens of the same state or not. One of the journals I have published in (*New Testament Studies*) is international; in any given issue articles are written in German, English, Italian, French, and other languages (I believe Scandinavian, but they are inscrutable to me). Scientists routinely work collaboratively on various projects; any study of global warming, for instance, requires data to be gathered from the entire globe. So our creational duty to join the rest of the human race in caring for the created order is a clear biblical duty, one that has been universally acknowledged. Aristotle's "Man is a political animal" should probably be translated "Man is an animal whose nature is to live in the city," by which he meant to live in cooperative relations with others. One can, therefore, be Aristotle's "political *animal*" (ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει ζῷον πολιτικόν, *Politics*, I.1253a2) without any involvement in the political *process*. And indeed, the question of any particular involvement with the political processes of a given state has reached nothing like consensus.

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empowered the civil magistrate to take away life." See John Gill Web site, *Exposition of the Bible*, <http://www.freegrace.net/gill/> (accessed July 7, 2012).



## Part Two: Four Options

Throughout Christian history, there have been basically four views of how the believer relates to the political process. I present the two extremes first, before moving to the two intermediary views, each of which I have sympathy with, one just “a tad” more than the other. I do not reject the two extreme views simply because they are extreme. Often viewpoints exist on a continuum; whenever they do so, some views must define the extremes, and I’m sure there must be some views I hold about some things that are, in this sense, “extreme.” So I do not employ the term “extreme” pejoratively, but because it may help to explain the logic of the four views in that manner. In short, the four views are these: Christian involvement in the political process is prohibited; Christian involvement in the political process is mandated; Christian involvement in the political process is permitted; and Christian involvement in the political process is permitted warily.

### First View: Thou Shalt Not Participate

The Anabaptist tradition has consistently taught that the kingdom of Christ is not merely different from earthly kingdoms, but is incompatible with them to such a degree that one cannot serve in both. Building upon Augustine’s idea of the “two cities” or “two kingdoms” of people on earth (those who desire to serve God and those who do not), the Anabaptists go further, and suggest that the differences between these two kingdoms is so radical that they cannot build a common kingdom together. They typically remind us, not merely that Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world, or to render to Caesar what was his but to God what was God’s; but they also call attention to such sayings of Jesus as this:

“But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over (κατακυριεύουσιν) them, and their great ones exercise authority (κατεξουσιάζουσιν) over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the

Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28).

The “great ones exercise authority over them,” but “it shall not be so among you” appears to be a fairly categorical denial of Jesus’s followers exercising such authority. The two verbs, however, are not the ordinary or “neutral” words for governance. Each suggests an abuse of power for self-aggrandizement.<sup>5</sup> Were any participation in the coercive power of government forbidden, Jesus would undoubtedly have required the centurion to have abandoned his profession (Matt. 8:5-13). Similarly, nothing in the record of the apostles’ interaction with the jailer at Philippi suggests that he was required to leave his position, yet he and his entire family believed and were baptized, though he continued to serve in the capacity of jailer the next day (Acts 16:22-37). The majority of the Christian tradition, therefore, has respectfully disagreed with the Anabaptist insistence that believers remove themselves entirely from the political process.

### Second View: Thou Shalt Participate

At the other end of the spectrum is a commonplace view in the United States among evangelical Christians. This view teaches that believers are not only permitted, but *required* to be active in the political process. While I can recall no notable theologian who has articulated the view, it appears to be commonplace. When I ask my students, for instance, if they have ever heard a minister from a Christian pulpit tell the congregation that it has a duty to vote, nearly all of my students raise their hands (The rest are sleeping peacefully, so we don’t disturb them....). I myself have witnessed the matter many times throughout the years, especially during election seasons.

The late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, published a pamphlet entitled *Your 5 Duties as a Christian Citizen*,<sup>6</sup> which I regard as representative of the view. In it, he said,

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the second, κατεξουσιάζω, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich say, “Perhaps *tyrannize*....” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 422.

<sup>6</sup> *New Life Resources* (Peachtree City, GA: New Life Resources, 1976, 2000, 2008).

“Voting for and supporting moral candidates who support moral public policies is *the minimum required* of Christian citizens in a system of self-government.”<sup>7</sup> After the duty of Prayer, Bright’s second duty was registering to vote: “To serve God as a citizen, *you must* become a regularly participating voter.... Register as soon as possible so that you can vote in the next election, *and in every election*, as a service for God.”<sup>8</sup> His fifth duty is simply voting: “*Vote consistently in every election... Only when you cast your vote* do you fulfill your Christian responsibility in government.”<sup>9</sup>

It is clear what Bill Bright wanted Christians to do. What is less clear is any biblical basis for his telling us to do some of these five things. One of them, praying for the magistrates, is perfectly fine and perfectly biblical, and accords with Paul’s instructions in the second chapter of his first letter to Timothy: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (I Timothy 2:1-2). But registering to vote or voting itself is not required anywhere in the Scriptures, so proponents of the view that one *must* be involved in the political process ordinarily do so via other reasoning. Three common strategies occur.

First, some employ the no-argument argument. That is, they just assume that if you love God, you will love your country and want to do “everything in your power” to see it prosper. Assuming the tendency of many people of many religions to blend piety and patriotism, the no-argument argument simply directs people to do what they would intuitively do anyway; it is pure preaching to the choir. To those not in the choir loft, however, we are left entirely unpersuaded by this line of reasoning, partly because there may be many other (non-political) ways of improving our culture, and partly because there is so little guarantee that our participation in the political process will necessarily have a positive effect (more below).

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<sup>7</sup> Bright, *Duties*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Bright, *Duties*, 12, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Bright, *Duties*, 19, 20. [All the emphases in the above quotes are mine; I added them to call attention to the imperative nature of what Bright required.]

Second, some suggest that political participation is a duty of charity. The reasoning goes like this: If you love your neighbor, you want what is best for him; and isn't good government best for your neighbor? Well, I suppose the duty of charity, then, would cause me to desire that my neighbor have good dental care also, but I've never filled his teeth. Desiring something for my neighbor does not necessarily mean that I must supply that helpful thing in my own person or by my own power. I'll try another illustration of this. Wouldn't love for my neighbor wish that he enjoy a beautiful classical symphony? Yes; it would. But I have written no symphonies myself; all I can do is recommend the ones that I like. A second problem with such reasoning is this: How do I know that *my* participation in the political process would have the *effect* of a better government? Suppose I lived in a district that, for the last century, has voted 80% Democrat and 20% Republican; and that all the polling indicates that, within two or three points either way, the result will be the same during the next election. Now, further suppose that I think that, on this occasion, the better candidate is the Republican. My voting for a person who still loses by a staggering margin of 60% does not make a better government; it has no consequence at all. So the assumption in the argument (that my voting *will* have the effect of better government for my neighbor, whom Christ has taught me to love) is not only gratuitous, in many cases, it is demonstrably false.

A third argument I've heard is the "salt and light" argument: Does not Jesus want us to be influential in our culture, to be "salt and light"? Indeed, Jesus wants that very thing. But again, hidden in the argument is an unstated assumption: that Jesus does not care about motivation, he only cares about overt/external behavior. If we employ the coercive power of the state to force someone to act contrary to his wishes, therefore, we have (presumably) accomplished a good thing. But what if our external behavior should flow from a renewed heart? What if Jesus wants us to "influence" people by example or moral suasion, rather than by coercion? I would argue that coercive power always de-humanizes, because it takes from the individual the power of moral choice. Example and moral suasion, by contrast, humanize others by appealing to their moral sensibility and responsibility. Sure, it is always right to influence others by Christlike

example and by cogent reasoning (if they're listening); but it is rarely right to coerce people to act against their will. Part of the argument in James Davison Hunter's recent book is that Christian use of coercive power in the last thirty-odd years has actually *decreased* our influence on our culture.<sup>10</sup>

None of these arguments that require our participation in the political process is anything more than specious. Each has apparent weight to those already inclined to agree with it, but little or no weight to those who examine it critically. It is simply not factually the case that political improvement is the only or best kind of improvement one could wish for one's neighbor or culture; it is simply not factually the case that our involvement in the political process necessarily improves it a whit; and it is simply not factually the case that specific individuals know enough about most matters of public policy to know what would be best for our culture anyway. Politicians are like used cars; if you're old enough, you've purchased a few "lemons." Most of us in our fifth decade can testify that many times when we were involved in the political process, we elected people who hurt our nation and the world rather than helped. I acted in good conscience when I voted for George W. Bush; had I known he would do what he did in Iraq (and, possibly, Afghanistan) before I voted for him, I would never have done so. We might have been better off if someone else had won the election; we hardly could have been worse off.

### Third View: Thou May Participate

The two less extreme views are very similar, partly because the other two were imperative and these two are merely permissive. Each is mandate-free; no "thou shalt" and no "thou shalt not." That one *may* participate in the political process is grounded in both a negative and a positive reality. Negatively, the Scriptures nowhere (even where we would have expected it with the centurion and the jailer) indicate that participation in the governing process is prohibited. Positively, as we consider how comprehensive the cultural mandate is, none of us

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (London: Oxford, 2010).

could possibly be required to do every potentially helpful thing; so each of us must make decisions about how best to expend our efforts, abilities, and interests, for the wellbeing of God's creation and our fellow creatures. Some of us, having considered the matter, will rightly decide to attempt to fulfill one aspect of the cultural mandate by our participation in the political process (or other state functions). Those who have the aptitude and interest (and no qualms—see Fourth View below) may throw themselves into the political process with the same fervor with which a poet throws himself into a sonnet. The political process is a lawful arena of human endeavor.

Other arenas are lawful also, and too, contribute to care of the created order and the wellbeing of other humans. Engineers make safe bridges; biologists and chemists make progress in nutrition and medicine; artists bring beauty to us, relieving us of the burden of the mundane; authors write books that enlarge our understanding; workers in soup kitchens feed the hungry or homeless; mentors volunteer to teach slower reading students to read better. The list is nearly endless. The cultural mandate does not “rank” these (and many other) worthwhile endeavors; so while we may commend them all, we may not commend one above others, or at the expense of others.

During my ninth year of school, I served the Virginia legislature as a page, and learned a good deal about how the legislative process works. I've never repented of being a page, and doubt I ever will. I kept the billbooks for my senators in an orderly manner; I delivered messages and ran errands quickly; and attempted to treat all in a cheerful and civil manner. Being involved in the political process (in my case, just helping it be a little more efficient) was a perfectly permissible thing for a believer to do. Unlike Bill Bright, however, I did not tell any other Christian that he or she had a “duty” to be a page. I have *commended* the practice, on occasion, to young people; but have never *commanded* it. I have also been involved in the political process in other ways, by registering, voting, polling, lobbying, etc. I regard these as permissible activities. But there are many other permissible activities that both cultivate God's order and serve other humans; and it would have been equally permissible to have chosen to do them also or instead.

#### Fourth View: Thou May Participate Warily

This fourth view has many similarities to the Third View, but it also has sufficient differences as to be thought of as a distinct option. This view, associated with people such as the French theologian Jacques Ellul and the University of Virginia's James Davison Hunter, is very wary of the exercise of coercive power (and all governmental power *is* coercive, because it rests upon the power to punish). Unlike the Anabaptist view, it does not regard the use of such power as unlawful for believers to exercise; however, it also does not view governmental power as "neutral," in the sense that the Third View might. It regards all exercise of coercive power as, at best, a necessary evil.

Ellul and Hunter promote this view on slightly different grounds (if I read them correctly). For Ellul, anarchy means "an absolute rejection of violence," which is why he could not "accept either nihilists or anarchists who choose violence as a means of action."<sup>11</sup> Ellul believed that the exercise of power tended to degrade those who employed it as much as (or more than) those whom they tyrannized: "We must never forget to what degree the holding of political power corrupts."<sup>12</sup> While many (nearly all) observers of human affairs recognize that there have been abuses of power, Ellul believed that participation in the exercise of coercive power itself was to be avoided if possible: "We can denounce not merely the abuses of power but power itself."<sup>13</sup> Ellul appears to have suggested that there is a social-psychological problem that reflects our fallen nature: On the one hand we often resist God's rule; while on the other hand, we wish others to submit to ours. Ellul appears to have been appealing to us to save ourselves from this demonic paradox; and to follow instead the Christ, who exercised no political power at all. But Ellul did not (to my knowledge) go quite as far as the Anabaptists, who forbid their members from holding office, for instance. Rather, he appears to have desired to create in us a

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<sup>11</sup> Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromieley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ellul, *Anarchy*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ellul, *Anarchy*, 23.

healthy *disrespect* for power-wielding. Wielding power is like snake-handling; if it is to be done at all, it must be done very warily.

James Davison Hunter advocates a similar position, but more for sociological than spiritual reasons. If Ellul believed that the exercise of power ordinarily corrupts those who wield it, Hunter believes that the exercise of power tends to make us ineffective in influencing our culture for any lasting good, partly because the evidence indicates that changes in laws and policies simply do not affect substantial change:

It [the state] is not nearly as influential as the expectations most people have of it. It is true that laws are not neutral. They do reflect values. But laws cannot generate values, or instill values, or settle the conflict over values. The belief that the state could help us care more for the poor and the elderly, slow the disintegration of traditional values, generate respect among different groups, or create civic pride, is mostly illusory.<sup>14</sup>

If Ellul regarded the state's power as almost demonically destructive, Hunter tends to dismiss it as remarkably impotent (though a very expensive impotence).

Where Hunter sounds a similar note to Ellul is in questioning the use of coercive power in its entirety. For most people, the primary political question is this: To what ends will we exercise coercive power? For Ellul and Hunter, the primary question is: Are there any ends for which coercive power is either justified or efficient? Like a challenged duelist who may select the weapon, Ellul and Hunter have reservations about the ease with which we pick up and use coercive power. Most orthodox Christians, for instance, have little regard for Nietzsche, whose *Übermensch* wields power for its own sake. Yet their naïve use of coercive power as though it were neutral makes them more Nietzschean than not.

Both Ellul and Hunter are self-consciously Christian about their critique of power, and this self-consciousness may be one of the most attractive things about what they say.

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<sup>14</sup> Hunter, *To Change*, 171.



Effectively, they say this: Christ has won us by His love, not by His power. During the time of his incarnation He surrendered much of His power, humiliating Himself to suffer with us and for us. His Spirit did no violence to us when He renewed our hearts to see the gospel that was there all the time. If the most important thing to us (our union with Christ) was affected with no coercive power at all, solely by the moral grandeur of sacrificial love, how can we be so eager to wield coercive power? Should we rather not choose, whenever possible, to influence others by other means? Which would have more effect on those around us: passing the Defense of Marriage Act or actually having a good, vibrant marriage from which others can both benefit and learn?

People who hear me express my sympathies with Ellul and Hunter often express their concern that I am “discouraging” young people from being active in the political process. I’m not sure the charge is just, because I overtly say that it is permissible to do so, and merely warn that there are also drawbacks to beware of. There are other permissible activities and professions that are also difficult or even dangerous. Health workers are exposed to many diseases; plumbers are exposed to waste; prison workers are exposed to a fairly unsavory clientele; fire departments, police departments, and the branches of the military routinely expose themselves to danger; even postal workers are exposed to the occasional maltempered canine. Would it be “discouraging” to tell young people that there are drawbacks to these fields of service? The only thing I discourage is a naïve belief that coercive power is a neutral or positive thing; it is not. It is inherently dangerous both for those who wield it and for those who are under it. In the state of innocence, all such coercion would be entirely unjust; and its only justification in the present circumstance is that it is needed to curb the wicked. It would be better if all who were involved in the political process shared my reluctance to employ coercive power.

### Part Three: Practical Counsel

For those who wish to participate in the political arena (whether by lobbying, voting, running for office, etc.), there are a number of practical considerations that Christian theologians and ethicists have suggested; and I pass along what I regard to be the most important ones here:

#### **This Is a Choice**

I have candidly conceded that political activity is a valid (but not the only valid) option for those who wish to serve their fellow citizens. I have also suggested that there are many other activities that fulfill the cultural mandate and improve the world around us. So the question of how to serve our fellows is not immediately or self-evidently answered by voting. Before we elect to be involved in the political process, I believe we should ask whether doing so *would likely benefit others sufficiently to justify our laboring therein*. Responsible voting requires far more than merely a ten-minute visit to the polling booth from time to time. To vote responsibly requires some knowledge of political theory, and especially of the Whig principles that were so central to our Republic. To vote responsibly requires some understanding of our particular form of government.<sup>15</sup> Voting responsibly requires some knowledge of current events and issues, and some knowledge of the beliefs, principles, and character of candidates. Many citizens express opinions about global warming, for instance; but global warming is immensely complex, and few of those citizens have access to the pertinent data or the ability to evaluate it (I surely am not competent to render an opinion on the matter). Similarly, many citizens express opinions about “Obamacare,” but virtually none of those citizens have read the legislation; indeed, few (if any) members of Congress have read it. It has often been referred to as “socialized medicine,” but it is entirely possible that there are particular measures therein that self-consciously distinguish our

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Bauerlein has observed, “In a 2003 survey on the First Amendment commissioned by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, only one in 50 college students named the first right guaranteed in the amendment, and one out of four did not know *any* freedom protected by it.” *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future* (New York: Tarcher, 2008), 10. How can such individuals preserve the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens if they do not know what they are? Bauerlein also observed that less than fifty per cent of high school graduates can name the three branches of government. What qualifies such individuals to vote intelligently? My view is the exact opposite of that of the League of Women Voters. They encourage a large turnout at the polls, and I would be pleased if no one showed up at all. And I have Plato (with his “philosopher-kings”) on my side.

form of universal healthcare from that of the other nations that have adopted it. I am often asked my opinion about Supreme Court decisions, and my ordinary answer is: “I haven’t had time to read the opinion(s) yet.” How can I express an opinion on a legal document I have not read? But almost everyone I know finds it odd that I exercise such restraint. To vote responsibly requires a substantial amount of labor, possibly several hours weekly or more; and some individuals might serve their fellow citizens better by devoting those hours to working in a soup kitchen, directing community theater, volunteering for hospital (or hospice) service, etc.

Permit me to illustrate this by the example of Madame Marie Curie. In order to study and research in Paris, she expatriated from her native Poland, though she remained fond of her birthplace throughout her life; she taught her children the Polish language, and named the first chemical element she discovered “polonium” in honor of her home. Nonetheless, her citizenship was apparently not “patriotic,” in any ordinary sense of the term; she was willing to renounce citizenship in one nation to pursue the wellbeing of fellow humans by researching in another state. I do not know whether Madame Curie was enfranchised either in Poland or in France, but assuming she was not, she was still a fine fellow citizen. That is, even if we assume that she may never have voted, she is one of the most productive fellow citizens of her generation. She cared for God’s created order, and found therein chemical properties that have changed medicine forever. Would she have been a better citizen by remaining in Poland and voting (if that were possible) or by leaving Poland to study/invent radiology in France? To ask the question is to answer it: There are many legitimate/permisible ways to fulfill the cultural mandate, and it is not a “slam dunk” that everyone should do so by participating in the political process.

We could repeat the illustration with any of the other Nobel prize winners (Curie was the first to receive two of them.), or with other notable individuals whose accomplishments were often both apolitical and achieved outside of their native land. Most of James Joyce’s writings were written after he left his native Ireland. Mstislav Rostropovich performed in exile from the Soviet Union for much of his career. Henry James “adopted” England as his home, and did most of his writing from there rather than from his native United States. Josephine Baker left the

United States (and its pervasive racism) to become a successful performer in Paris. Albert Einstein left Germany for the United States in 1939, and did much of his work here. In each case, the individual in question made important strides in fulfilling the cultural mandate and caring for/cultivating God's order, and in each case, the individual served fellow humans well. But all did so without participating in the political processes of their native country, and possibly without participating in them elsewhere. Each was "political" only by protest; by leaving a situation that was constraining or evil; none participated in the particular political processes of their native land.

### **A Moral Minefield**

Writers such as Jacques Ellul and James Davison Hunter have echoed what Lord Acton famously wrote to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Wielding coercive power over others is unnatural; it was not part of the original created order but arose because of sin. Tragically, an institution designed to restrain sin also has a tendency to produce it, to make us self-interested, partisan, and/or morally compromised. Living in a fallen world, we witness (and perform) a good deal of folly and hear (and express) a good deal of stupidity. I can honestly say that most of the really stupid things I have heard in my life have been in discussions of matters of public policy. When it comes to such discussions, otherwise-intelligent people say some of the most uninformed and illogical things. Partisan politics, especially, tends to numb the brain, causing us to invent secondary rationalizations for anything our partisans propose and vice versa.

What we *do* eventually shapes what we *become*. Yo-Yo Ma's years of music have shaped him into one of the most lovely humans we've seen. Mother Teresa's years of service to the poor made her remarkably Christlike. Parents of severely disabled children often become wonderfully compassionate. But which of us can recall a politician whom we regarded as exceptionally humane? We can easily produce a list of politicians whom we regard with contempt; it is much harder to produce a list of those we regard as exemplary. Does this not reflect the wisdom of Lord Acton, Jacques Ellul, James Davison Hunter, and others? One *can* be

involved in the political process and escape reasonably unharmed, just as one can serve in the military and also escape unharmed. But each arena is inherently hazardous, and we should not enter either arena without a due consideration of its likely costs and dangers.

### **The Law of Charity: Loving one's neighbor**

Christians can never, in any context, exempt themselves from the moral duty of loving one's neighbor. This comprehensive principle should govern political activity also. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney put it this way:

The obligation is not only negative, such, namely, as binds us to refrain from injuring their wellbeing; but it is also positive, binding us actively to promote their welfare in all ways proper for us.... Each citizen is entitled in his private actions to pursue his own individual interests, provided he does it consistently, with justice and charity to others. But in every action which he performs as a citizen he is dealing for the copartnership, and is bound to pursue the common interests equally, seeking no more for himself than for all his copartners. The voter in voting (his main political power and action) is bound to set aside personal ends and vote for those policies alone which will be equally promotive of his own, his family's and all his fellow citizens' rights and interests.”<sup>16</sup>

Dabney was right. Christian citizens are not morally free to be as Machiavellian or self-interested as most political activists are. The Christian citizen is “bound to pursue the common interests equally, seeking no more for himself than for all his copartners.” Indeed, one of the great moral temptations of political activity is the temptation to justify the very self-interest that in any other arena we would instinctively regard as unChristian.

### **The Golden Rule**

While “love your neighbor as yourself” demands a different approach to political behavior, the so-called “golden rule” becomes a great ethical touchstone in the same arena: “Do

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<sup>16</sup> Dabney, *The Practical Philosophy* (1897, reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1984), 324, 424.

unto others as you would have others do unto you.” What could be more helpful in the political arena than a maxim such as this? Which of us, for instance, would desire to bear a disproportionate amount of the tax burden? Well, then we should not want others to do so either. Would we desire our private (not public) behaviors to be regulated by law? Well, then we should not regulate those behaviors by others. Would we wish the (non-medically-trained) legislature to dictate to our medical professionals how best to treat us? Well, then we should not wish the same body to dictate medical laws to the medical professionals of others. There are many Christian PACs, but I have not yet found one whose fundamental concern is the golden rule. I know of no organization whose basic thesis is that political action should never require of others what we would regard as odious if required of ourselves, and apply it consistently across the board. And perhaps this accounts for our failure to be influential when our numbers are so great. We do not heed, in the political arena, what even our non-believing friends know to be the ethical guidelines of our professed Leader.

#### Conclusion

Through the vast majority of human history, and throughout much of the world today, the individual was not able to participate in the political process. Our modern representative democracies are fairly recent. Now, participation in the political process has become a possibility that was not experienced before. As I have attempted to demonstrate here, we are morally bound to fulfill the purposes for which God created us, but we are *not* morally bound to fulfill those purposes in precisely the same way. Some individuals will engage in the political process, in order to assist government in achieving the purposes for which God designed it. Those who do so will also decide *how* they can achieve the most good, whether by canvassing, working at polling booths, voting, lobbying, or running for office (or some combination). Others will elect to contribute to fulfilling the cultural mandate in other ways. They will elect to care for God’s order and to love their neighbors via non-political activity. Either (or some combination) is permissible.