

Culture and Theology

Politics

September 14, 2024

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Schedule

8:45-9:30 Session 1: *A Primer on Politics*

9:30-45 break

9:45-10:30 Session 2: *Thinking Theologically and Biblically about Politics*

10:30-45 break

10:45-11:30 Session 3: *Principles for Practicing Politics*

11:30-12:00 Q&A

SESSION 1: A PRIMER ON POLITICS

Introduction

What is politics?

politikos

oikonomikos

civitas

“the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of status or resources.”
(Wikipedia)

“the total complex of relations between people living in society.” (Merriam Webster)

Politics = love for neighbor

“Politics is about love because it is about life together that, at every level, without love, is tragically diminished.” (David Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*)

who gets what, when, where, why, and how?

A symbiotic relationship

“Politics is the art of associating men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them...The subject matter of politics is therefore association, in which the symbiotes pledge themselves each to the other, by explicit or tacit agreement, to mutual communication of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious exercise of social life.” (Johannes Althusius, *Politica*)

The goal of politics: establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life.

the harmonious exercise of social life

“Leading a peaceful life, in Paul’s phrase, is the goal of political life – indeed, of all human life once it is perceived in its social posture.” (Ephraim Radner, *Mortal Goods*)

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. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior... (1 Timothy 2:1–3)

How do we achieve this harmony, this peace?

“Good government minimizes barriers to the gospel of shalom and maximizes the conditions for preaching, receiving, and living it.” (David Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*)

Politics | the ordering of society

“If ‘politics,’ in a general way, refers to the deliberate judgments and decisions ordering our corporate existence, then our Christian calling is to limit our politics to the boundaries of our actual created lives and to the goods that stake out these limits: our births, our parents, our siblings, our families, our growing, our brief persistence in life, our raising of children, our relations, our decline, our deaths. These mark the goods of our lives along with the acts that sustain these goods, like toil and joy, suffering, prayer, and giving thanks. Christian politics is aimed at no more or less than the tending of these ‘mortal goods.’” (Ephraim Radner, *Mortal Goods*)

“Politics may be defined as the shared life of liberty that involves ruling and being ruled in turn among equals for the common good: life, prosperity, piety, and morality – or, to speak more accurately, the protection of life and of the conditions suitable for prosperity, piety, and moral flourishing” (David Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*)

The necessity of “common” goods

“an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love” (Augustine, *The City of God*)

“Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience.” (Augustine, *The City of God*)

Two competing visions of good. Two loves!

“It is the decided opinion of all who use their brains, that all men desire to be happy. But who are happy, or how they become so, these are questions about which the weakness of human understanding stirs endless and angry controversies, in which philosophers have wasted their strength and expended their leisure.” (Augustine, *The City of God*)

Common morality and the founding of the republic

“Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.” (Benjamin Franklin)

“Liberty is the learned capacity to govern oneself using the higher faculties of reason and spirit through the cultivation of virtue.” (Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*)

“Liberty is the fruit of virtue; virtue is not the fruit of liberty.” (Aron MacIntyre, *The Total State*)

“Freedom properly understood – that is, maturely and most thoughtfully – is not self-indulgence, but self-government, the ability to govern one’s passions and impulses and order one’s affairs with a view to what is right and good. Like all other just government, self-government looks to something beyond and above itself for direction.” (David Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*)

“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” (John Adams)

“Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt.” (Samuel Adams)

“Religion and morality are the essential pillars of civil society.” (George Washington)

“Without a similar basis for both logic and morality, no shared culture can be formed.” (Aron MacIntyre, *The Total State*)

“politics is a function of culture and culture, in turn, is reflective of (if not a function of) religion.” (Richard John Neuhaus)

“Culture always embodies religion.” (Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity*)

neutrality is a myth

Not whether but which!

“Not whether, but which. It is not whether we will have an established state religion, but rather which established state religion we will have. It is not whether our culture will serve a god, but rather which god it will serve. It is not whether we will impose morality with a law, but rather which morality we will impose with a law. It is not whether our culture will rest upon a blood sacrifice, but rather which blood sacrifice it will be. It is not whether we will discipline in terms of our public morality, but rather which group will be disciplined. Not whether, but which.” (Doug Wilson)

“It is fashionable today to cynically dismiss the political uses of religion. But we practice something novel in the history of the world, what we call the ‘separation of Church and state.’” (C.R. Wiley, *The Household and the War for the Cosmos*)

When neutrality isn’t actually neutral!

Who defines what is good? Who defines what constitutes true happiness?

anthrocentric or theocentric

politics is inherently theological

idolatry?

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. (Psalm 146:3)

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes. (Psalm 118:9)

The gospel as the kingdom of God.

‘There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!’ (Abraham Kuyper)

The gospel is political!

SESSION 2: THINKING THEOLOGICALLY AND BIBLICALLY ABOUT POLITICS

How have Christians thought about politics historically?

Early church

Decian Persecution and the martyrs

313: Constantine issues Edict of Milan: Christianity tolerated

380 Theodosius I issues Edict of Thessalonica: Christianity established as official religion

410 fall of Rome

Augustine writes de Civitas Dei (The City of God)

Two cities, two loves, two citizenships

Medieval period: papacy and Holy Roman Empire

Reformation: two kingdoms

General principles:

First, politics and political rule is natural and good.

Second, sin vitiates our nature and therefore makes politics and political rule difficult.

Third, the purpose of politics and political rule is to make human beings better.

Fourth, politics and political rule is a limited means.

Spectrum of more or less "Christian thought"

Anabaptists: radical separation

Religious neutrality: liberalism/libertarianism

Religious influence

Church and state overlap to some degree

Church directs the state entirely

"God intended the Bible to give guidance to every area of life – including how governments should function!" (Wayne Grudem, Politics)

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:1–12)

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7)

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. (Jeremiah 29:5–6)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. (Romans 13:1–7)

"The characteristic of a true sovereign, is to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God." (John Calvin, Institutes)

“For as bolts of lightning strike to the hazard of a few and the fear of all, so punishments scare more persons than those who are actually punished for evil. When punishment comes to one person, fear comes to others subject to punishment for the same crime. Whence punishments are called remedies by which the illnesses of a commonwealth are overcome and cured.”
(Althusius, *Politica*)

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)

Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. (Psalm 94:20–21)

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. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior... 1 Tim 2:1–3)

“Peace is a good so great, that even in this earthly and mortal life there is no word we hear with such pleasure, nothing we desire with such zest, or find to be more thoroughly gratifying.”
(Augustine, *The City of God*)

and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12)

“political authority provides the peace necessary for doing everything else, whether it is learning French, playing football, buying and selling, raising a family, or worshiping God. Peace is the garden of the arts and of all culture.” (David Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men*)

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:13–17)

Justice

- *When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. (Proverbs 21:15)*
- *Righteousness [justice] exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. (Proverbs 14:34)*
- *You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:19–20)*
- *The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. (Deuteronomy 32:4)*
- *Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 82:3–4)*
- *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. (Isaiah 1:16–17)*
- *Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:23–24)*
- *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)*
- *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? (Micah 6:8)*

So what is justice?

Is it justice for an utterly defenseless child to be ripped apart in her mother's womb? Is it justice for a child to be taken from his parents because he's been indoctrinated into sexual perversion?

Is it just to steal from hard-working people to redistribute their wealth to those who refuse to work? Is it just to arrest Christians who thought that a public health scare wasn't sufficient reason to disobey God's call to not give up meeting together?

Is it just to allow men to compete in women's sports? Is it just to allow rioters to destroy property as a form of protest? Is it just to charge someone with a hate crime for failing to use a false pronoun?

Is it just for a child to grow up without a parent in order to protect the freedom of self-actualization?

those who frame injustice by statute, band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. (Psalm 94:20–21)

"who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!" (Amos 5:7)

"Justice is rendering impartially and proportionally to everyone his due in accord with the righteous standards of the moral law of God." (E. Calvin Beisner)

"the virtue by virtue of which each possesses what belongs to him or herself." (Aristotle)

"strict adherence to law" (Louis Berkhof)

"closely related to holiness is God's righteousness, by which he equitably and justly vindicates the righteous and condemns the wicked...This is the pattern for earthly justice as well- for kings, judges, and every Israelite. YHWH is the true judge, and the manifestation of his righteousness is simultaneously the manifestation of his grace." (Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics)

"justice consists in not regarding the person, in hearing the small and the great alike, in not fearing a person's face, for judgment is for the Lord." (Bavinck)

Biblical justice MUST BE impartial, truthful, proportional, direct.

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD. (Proverbs 17:15)

the question isn't whether, but which.

justice is downstream of politics which is an implication of theology

"I believe that God's perspective on politics is joyful 'good news,' just as the rest of the Bible is good news for all areas of life! I believe the Bible's teachings about politics will bring hope and beneficial change to people in every nation where they are put into practice. When these teachings are put into practice in a nation, it will be good news for those who are oppressed, good news for young and old, weak and powerful, rich and poor – good news for everyone who will follow the wonderful paths of freedom and sound government that are taught in the pages of the Bible." (Wayne Grudem, Politics)

SESSION 3: *PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICING POLITICS*

1. God cares about your politics.

Against apathy!

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

“all of Christ for all of life”

2. Politics are neither all nor nothing.
3. Christians have a political responsibility.
4. We cannot divorce the gospel from politics.
5. We need to distinguish direct and indirect commands.

Direct and indirect: straight-line and jagged

Knowledge vs. wisdom

“Politics, Conscience, and the Church: The Why, What, and How of Political Disagreement” by Andy Naselli (www.Christoverall.com)

6. Beware the allure of pious sounding half-truths.

Jesus wasn't a republican or a democrat?

a false equivalence

God's kingdom isn't of this world?

If you really love your neighbor, you will wear a mask or get a vaccine?

"when helping hurts"

You can't legislate morality?

7. Cultivate a taxonomy of political priorities.

Theological taxonomy: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd order doctrines

Political taxonomy: what are priorities?

History of party distinctions

"there's not a dime's worth of difference between the two major parties." (George Wallace)

"Whereas elections once pitted the party of the working class against the party of Wall Street, they now pit voters who believe in a fixed and universal morality against those who see moral issues, especially sexual ones, as elastic and subject to personal choice." (Thomas Byrne Edsall)

The 5 D's (by Darryl Harrison): Death (Abortion) - Debauchery (Queer Theory) - Discrimination (DEI and CRT) - Disorder (Illegal Immigration) - Disobedience (Rampant Crime).

8. Christians should be aware of the times in which we live.

Of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, 200 chiefs, and all their kinsmen under their command. (1 Chronicles 12:32)

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" (John 12:4-5)

He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. (John 12:6)

The importance of anthropology

9. Voting isn't about personal preferences, but the divine will.

WEAL

Commonwealth

"It can be, and often is, unjust to subject people to powerful temptation to do things that are harmful to them, morally or otherwise, and whether or not they are cognizant of the harm." (Robert George)

"All laws and rights, whatever they may be, have their ultimate ground, not in a social contract, not in self-existent natural law or in history, but in the will of God, viewed not as 'absolute dominion' but as a will of goodness and grace. God's grace is the fountainhead of all laws and rights." (Bavinck)

10. We can never vote for the greater of two evils.

Innocent as doves...wise as serpents!

The importance of wisdom! Applied knowledge of biblical principles.

The Opportunity Facing the Church Today

Justice may at times leave the courts of man, but it abides upon the tribunal of God. (Charles Haddon Spurgeon)

“There is one political maxim which comforts me: ‘*The Lord reigns!*’ His hand guides the storm; and He knows them that are His, how to protect, support, and deliver them.” (John Newton)

God WINS!

Q&A

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Christianity and Democracy by Jacques Maritain
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The Case for Christian Nationalism by Stephen Wolfe
Politica by Johannes Althusius
The Benedict Option by Rod Dreher
The Boniface Option by Andrew Isker

Recommended Reading (not that I endorse everything in every one of these, but they were probably the most helpful in my own thinking)

Mere Christendom: Doug Wilson
The Total State: Auron MacIntyre
Politics: Wayne Grudem
Against Christianity: Peter Leithart
Americanreformer.org
Christoverall.com