

*Edmund P. Clowney*

## “The Politics of the Kingdom”

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“THE PROBLEM THAT IS POSED for us today (in the relation of theology and politics) comes from the fact that theology does not appear to be comprehensive any longer. Starting with theology it becomes difficult to construct any theory of society whatever.”<sup>1</sup>

The remark with which Laënnec Hurbon introduces his study of the work of Ernst Bloch has immediate appeal. Has not Christian theology limited itself to a private religion of personal devotion? What meaning can such religion have for a world sweeping to destruction in a flood of catastrophic social and environmental problems?

Perhaps that rhetorical question might receive a surprising answer from places where the flood has struck. Personal religion gains new meaning in the Gulag Archipelago.

But contemporary theologians seem unanimous in warning us against the dangers of pietistical world-flight. To end the blight of other-worldly irrelevance, theologians of the left have propounded a new political gospel.

Some have prepared a collage for a theology of liberation by liberating with their scissors a selective assortment of Bible passages. Was not Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery the central event of the Old Testament? Are not the prophets the champions of the exploited against the exploiters? Did not Jesus die between two freedom-fighters, himself a victim of Roman imperialism and reactionary Judaism? The only mystery left for this theology of revolution is how the gospel became the opiate of the people.

A more elaborate secularization of the gospel is offered by Jürgen Moltmann in the wake of the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. Bloch recognizes a more significant revolutionary role for the mythical and the utopian. The day-dreaming that produced Christianity is needed to kindle the fires of revolutionary action. Bloch finds an example in the revolutionary millenarianism of Thomas Müntzer, whose part in the Peasant's Revolt contrasted with Martin Luther's defense of the nobility. Bloch accepts the atheistic rejection of Christian orthodoxy, but uses the category of the *possible* to project a dialectical ideal: not the hidden God (*deus absconditus*), but the hidden man (*homo absconditus*), the man of the future. Bloch criticizes the logical determinism of the Hegelian dialectic for limiting the future to the outworking of the past. Bloch offers instead a philosophy of hope that is not determined but open.

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<sup>1</sup> Laënnec Hurbon, “Théologie et politique dans l'oeuvre d'Ernst Bloch” in *Études théologiques et religieuses* 49: 2, 1974, p. 201.

Moltmann designs a Christian theology with Bloch's pattern: a future-oriented theology, styled not to the incarnation and the mythical past, but to the resurrection and the historical future. He discards theological categories of being, patterned after metaphysics, and substitutes patterns of becoming, expressive of history and eschatology. The freedom of the open-ended future draws men from the divisiveness of creedal religion into the unity of "proligion."

The response of orthodox Christian theology to the challenge of the theology of revolution has sometimes been more political than theological. American evangelicals, at least, have been more sensitive to Moltmann's Marxist sympathies than to his process theology. On the other hand, evangelicals have felt vulnerable on the issues of social concern, and it is often suggested that contemporary Christianity needs both Billy Graham's interest in saving souls and the World Council of Churches' interest in saving social structures. The problem with this patchwork solution is becoming increasingly evident. Billy Graham and World Council theologians have very different views of salvation.

Yet it is not the case that orthodox theology presents only individual salvation and that contemporary secular theology has discovered social salvation. The Biblical category that joins the salvation of the individual and of society is the category of the kingdom of God. The announcement of the kingdom is the distinctive message of the Gospels; the theology of the kingdom lies at the heart of New Testament revelation. In the theology of the kingdom the contrast between secularized theology and what we may again have to call sacred theology is most sharply drawn.

The kingdom Jesus proclaims is not the kingdom of Israel; it is the kingdom of God. It comes not by man's work but by God's will. Indeed, the very phrase "kingdom of God" defines the kingdom by the King. To be sure, the power of the kingdom of God forms a community of men, but that community is distinguished from all others by the simple fact that it is ruled by the King of heaven. The heavenly *polis* does not lack a political form, but the form of the kingdom is *theopolitical*, the saving rule of God.

To understand the politics of the kingdom we must consider both the Lord of the kingdom and the community of the kingdom as they are joined in the salvation revealed in the New Testament.

## I. *The Lord of the Kingdom*

The term *basileia* in the New Testament describes the rule of God rather than the realm of God, his dominion rather than his domain. In this sense it describes the immediate rule that is exercised by the Lord who comes in royal power: "The Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). Men may be called into it or cast out of it; they may seek it or inherit it, but they do not compose it (cf. Matt. 7:21; 21:31; 23:13; Mark 9:47; 10:14f; Lk. 16:16).

The coming of the kingdom is one with the coming of the King. John the Baptist announces that the kingdom is at hand in the words of Isaiah: "Prepare ye in the desert a highway for our God!" (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3). As in his Exodus deliverance God will come to redeem his people.

Old Testament eschatology focuses on the coming of the Lord. On the one hand, the condition of God's people is so desperate that only God can deliver them. On the other hand, the salvation God promises is so rich that it cannot be realized apart from the fullness of God's own presence. Both of these reasons are developed and heightened in Old Testament history. From Israel's helpless slavery in Egypt to their dead bones in the valley of Ezekiel's vision their need for divine help is constantly and increasingly emphasized. God's deliverance, in contrast, comes by his sovereign word through Moses' staff, Gideon's trumpet, or Samson's weapon, the jaw-bone of an ass. This theme is not developed at random. It is developed in the framework of covenantal history outlined in Deuteronomy (30:1-6). After the covenant blessings have been granted to the people in the land, and after the disobedience of Israel brings the curses of the covenant ending in captivity, then God will renew his covenant, circumcise the hearts of his people, and bring all his promises to realization.

As this history unfolds, the prophets dramatically declare that because all other help and hope is gone, God himself will put on his helmet of salvation and come to deliver his own (Ezek. 34:10f; Isa. 59:17). The nations are astonished and even God's people marvel at the hidden treasures of God's bright designs (Isa. 52:14f; Jer. 33:3). If the neo-Marxist category for the future is possibility, the divine category is *impossibility*. "Is any word too wonderful for God?" That question put to the aged Sarah about the promised Isaac be-

comes the reply of Gabriel to the virgin Mary (Lk. 1:37; Gen. 18:14).

There is another reason why God must come: not only the impossibility of the situation but the glory of the salvation God has promised. God comes down in the exodus deliverance not just to demand that Pharaoh let his people go, but to bear them on eagle's wings to himself (Ex. 7:26; 19:4). Not the liberation from Pharaoh's service but the imposition of the Lord's covenant is the meaning of the exodus. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jon.2:10) does not only mean that salvation is from God, but that salvation is found in him: "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12).

The pseudo-eschatology of contemporary thought makes the present time the hinge of history. All the past is consigned to the Dark Ages; the utopian eschaton will come when the revolution puts the tolls of technology in the hands of the people. Biblical eschatology cannot be converted to a search for what the Gentiles seek. The final blessing of salvation must be God's gift of himself. That gift was given in the birth of Jesus Christ. The incarnate Lord cannot be made the symbol of either a new economic system or a new humanity more inclined to make it work. Biblical salvation is defined by the Savior in the reality of his person and work.

Because the Lord himself comes, all human complacency is shattered. Even the most oppressed must fear this Deliverer. But the Lord does not come in judgment; his hosts do not come as avenging angels to usher in his kingdom. Rather they declare the sign of his humiliation: the shepherds will find Christ the Lord in the feed-bin of a stable (Lk.2:12). The Lord has come to save his people . . . from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

The Lord of Glory has come as he promised; he cannot be barred by Caesar's decrees, Herod's soldiers, Satan's rage, or Aristotle's metaphysics. The foolishness of God is wiser than men. In the incarnation God comes both as Lord and as Servant, for he must fulfill both sides of his covenant with his people. When God meets man, the smiting of his judgment must fall, and the worship of an obedient heart must be offered. God's salvation comes through the victory of his Anointed who offers himself as the final sacrifice and who is raised in triumph to the right hand of his Father.

Just as Christ's presence brings the kingdom, so his triumph established it. He is Lord over the wind and the sea, life and death, men and demons. His authority to heal is one with his authority to teach and to forgive sins (Mk. 2:10f). His miracles are signs of cleansing, restoring God's creation from the pollution of evil. He casts out demons because he has bound the "strong man," Satan, in his wilderness ordeal (Matt. 4:10). Accused of being in league with the devil, he refutes the charge and adds, "But if I by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you" (Lk. 11:20).

None of the battles of history can compare with the encounter of the Son of God with the "Prince of this world" in the desert. As God's chosen, called and endowed with the Spirit, he must crush the head of the serpent in the conflict of his life and the triumph of his death. In the shadow of the cross Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (Jn. 12:31).

Paradoxically, Jesus' victory over Satan is accomplished by his own death on the cross. His "lifting up" in crucifixion is a lifting up to glory. At the cross he finished his work of salvation and glorified his Father; from the cross he will draw men to himself (Jn. 12:32). The kingdom power of the cross does not rest in the cross as a symbol but as a sacrifice. "The Son of Man is come . . . to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). God's salvation cannot simply deliver some men from other men, or even all men from global disaster. God's salvation must deliver men from themselves and from the power of the devil. But above all God's salvation must deliver men from his own wrath and curse. The cross is God's gift of his only begotten Son; it is not another incident in the centuries of repression and rebellion but the final deliverance for man made in the image of God.

To the politics of human power the cross is foolishness. Even John the Baptist was confused by the failure of Jesus to bring liberation through judgment. John had proclaimed Jesus as the coming One, the judge who would wield the axe against every tree of unrighteousness. But John found himself in prison, awaiting what proved to be a death sentence while Jesus continued to perform miracles of kingdom power. John's faith was shaken. He sent messengers to Jesus asking, "Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?" (Lk. 7:19).

Jesus' answer was to make John's emissaries witnesses of his mighty works. Reminding them of what they had seen and heard in words that recalled Isaiah's description of the great day of salvation (Isa. 26:19; 29:18; 35:5,6; 61:1), Jesus sent them back to John with a blessing to challenge his faith: "Blessed is he, whosoever shall find no occasion of stumbling in me" (Lk. 7:23). Jesus did not come first to inflict the judgment but to bear it. Only in the temple did he lift the scourge of judgment, and then only to expel those who defiled God's house of prayer. No, he came to bear the scourge, to open the gates of life by receiving the thrust of death.

Christ's resurrection seals the reality of the salvation that is completed in his life and death. Christ does not provide a symbol for the liberation men must find for themselves in later generations, nor is he an early example of the man of the future. Rather, his death is the great personal transaction in which the Son of God atones for sin by the sacrifice of himself. So, too, his life provides the comprehensive and final fulfillment of kingdom righteousness. Apart from Christ there is no fulfillment of God's calling. Human culture celebrates the technology of war in the hymn of Lamech (Gen. 4:23f) and raises the tower of Babel in the cult of the city, but all men's works are under the judgment of God. Only one Man is righteous, the Heir of all the promises of God and the observer of all the commandments of God.

Christ the second Adam fulfills the calling of the first. Adam was charged to fill the earth and subdue it. Man's dominion, lyrically described in Psalm 8, is realized in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, as the author of Hebrews declares (Heb. 2:5-8). Further, in his resurrection glory at the Father's right hand Christ fills all things. Paul describes Christ's filling both in reference to the church (his fullness as his body) and in reference to the world, which he fills with the sovereignty of his rule (Eph. 4:10; Jer. 23:23). In Jesus Christ man's vocation of sonship as God's image-bearer is completely realized. The final depth of the covenant relation is not "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people," but "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee" (Ps. 2:7; Heb. 1:5). The beloved Son of the Father is the true Israel, the "Minister of the circumcision" (Rom. 15:8) to fulfill the calling of the servant nation because he is the Servant-Son. In Jesus Christ God calls his Son out of Egypt (Matt.

2:15; Hos. 11:1), proves him in the desert (Dt. 8:2; Matt. 4:1), offers him on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:1), and gives him the nations as his inheritance (Ps. 2:8; Matt. 28:18).

In Christ the Old and New Covenant people of God are united. Christ does not fulfill the old to clear the way for the new. Rather he fulfills the new in his own person and work. Certainly he does not provide a "cultic" service to initiate a new era of cultural flowering. The whole calling of man is fulfilled in the Son of Man.

Christ who brings the kingdom in his person and fulfills it in his work calls men into the kingdom according to his purposes. The kingdom comes in God's program, not ours; we are blessed if we are not offended by the Lord's way.

Christ calls men to take up a cross to follow him. His way is the way of suffering that leads to glory. The delay of God's judgment means that those who preach Christ crucified must be prepared to suffer for his name. God's justice delayed is not justice denied. Rather God holds open the door of mercy; he will not pour out the wrath to come until he has gathered in all that great host for whom he poured out his wrath on his only Son. With heavenly power Jesus Christ now gathers in those other sheep from the ends of the earth. To that end he restrains the wicked and disciplines his people. But he does not yet call the nations to stand before him; not until his second coming will they know the day of the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:16).

But Christ's limitation of his judgment does not spring from any limitation of his power. Mysterious as his ways may seem to his persecuted saints, he pursues with divine wisdom his purposes of grace. The risen Christ is exalted as Prince and Savior to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins (Acts 5:31). In his dominion he sends his disciples to the ends of the earth to proclaim life to the Gentiles (Matt. 28:18-20). His Spirit, the gift of his enthronement, gives not only his power for the task, but his life, the new life of the coming age. The new creation has begun: the Creator Spirit is the breath of the Lord in the bosoms of new creatures in Christ Jesus (Jn. 20:22; Rom. 8:10,11).

In and through the risen Christ, Christian hope is both realistic and realized. The future hope is not a mythic model: it is as real as the bread and fish eaten by the risen Lord. That future hope is also present

through the Holy Spirit breathed by the Lord upon his disciples. In the Gospel of John future and present hope is expressed in the formula, “The hour cometh and now is.” From the time that the Word became flesh the hour of fulfillment began: the Resurrection was present in Christ (Jn. 11:25; cf. 5:21). But the lifting up of the Lord assured the coming of the day when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and live (Jn. 5:25).

So, too, Paul says, “Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11), looking toward the day of the Lord’s appearing. Yet faith in Christ brings the Christian in to present possession of salvation and sonship (I Cor. 15:2; Rom. 10:10; 8:15-17). The Spirit of Christ is the seal of present grace and the earnest of future glory (Rom. 8:15f.; Eph. 1:13,14).

Christian hope, then, is not allegiance to the possible in a random universe. It is longing for the completion of God’s work of restoration and renewal, longing for the new creation that is as real as Christ’s resurrection body which is its center and beginning. *Homo absconditus*, the dream-man of secular utopianism, is but a mask of Anti-Christ. In Jesus Christ, the *Deus Homo*, God is revealed in his grace and truth. “He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (I Jn. 5:20,21 NIV).

## II. *The Community of the Kingdom*

The actualization of God’s saving rule in Jesus Christ requires a real and heavenly form for the people of his kingdom, Christ the Lord came to gather a people: the remnant flock preserved for him and given to him, a flock that must include other sheep from the Gentiles as well as the chosen of Israel (Lk. 12:32; Jn. 10:16). The people gathered by the Lord form the new humanity, the full community of the kingdom.

God had called his covenant people to be his own possession, a people near to him, and to praise him before the nations (I Pet. 2:9, 10; Ex. 19:4-6; Isa. 43:21). Israel failed in this doxological task, but in spite of that failure and even through it God caused the nations to see his glory. The prophets promise the great day when God will gather the remnant of the nations with the remnant of Israel and pour out his blessing on both (Isa. 19:25; Jer. 48:47; Zech. 14:16).

The preserved remnant of the people of God will be small indeed—like a piece of a sheep’s ear in the mouth of a lion. But the saved remnant will be made a saving remnant. From the stump of the cedar will grow the shoot that will become an ensign to the nations (Isa. 11:1). God’s Servant is the shoot from the root of Jesse, and God says to him: “It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

The promised renewal of the people of God will be in depth as well as breadth. God will circumcise the hearts of his people (Dt. 30:6; Jer. 32:39; Ezek. 11:16). Continually the history of God’s covenant points to a greater realization in the future. The patriarchs confessed that they were pilgrims and aliens journeying toward the true city of God (Gen. 47:9; Heb. 11:10). Israel at Sinai was pointed to the land of promise and the place where God would set his name. David established Jerusalem as his capital, but confessed that he was an alien as his fathers had been (Ps. 39:13). At the dedication of the temple, Solomon acknowledged that the construction of men could not contain the living God (I Kings 8:27).

God’s final blessings therefore include unimaginably more than the restoration of a golden past. David and his throne, the Levites and the ark, the city and the temple—all these must be renewed, yet not by a restoration that would carry the people of God back in history to David’s time. No, God’s final restoration is a new creation, and that new creation is established in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Son of David, but his throne is as much above David’s as God’s right hand is above the earthly hill of Zion. It is in his risen glory that Jesus Christ will build his assembly as he raises up the tabernacle of David that is fallen down (Amos 9:11,12; Matt. 16:18; Acts 15:16,17).

“I will build my church”—Jesus Christ is the architect of the people of God. He speaks his word constituting the new Israel after he has elicited from Simon Peter a distinctive confession of faith in him. With flattering unbelief the multitudes call him a prophet, yet they will not hail as Messiah one who will not march on Jerusalem to set up a political kingdom. But in spite of Jesus’ refusal of this Messianic role,

Peter confesses him not only as the Christ, but as the Son of the living God.

“Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.” Jesus is not contrasting Peter with the eleven, for he has just served as their spokesman in answering the question Jesus addressed to them all.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Jesus is contrasting Peter the apostle, the recipient of revelation from the Father, with the false teachers of the people of God who sit in Moses’ seat and use the keys of the kingdom to lock out those who might enter (Matt. 23:2,3,13). The true people of God confess the Son of God. To those who reject him, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt. 21:43).

The word “church” asserts the unity of the new people of God. The Greek word “ecclesia” translates the Hebrew term “qahal.” Both mean “assembly.” The Old Testament assembly is defined by the great covenant assembly at Sinai. It is extended in the major assemblies for covenant renewal and in the festival assemblies three times a year. In assembly the people stand before their covenant Lord. They are not a tribe, defined genealogically, but a holy nation bound together by the word of God in the presence of God.

At Pentecost the wind and flame of the Spirit make the feast of the first-fruits the Sinai of the New Covenant. The author of Hebrews declares that Christians have not come again to Sinai, but to the heavenly Zion where the festival assembly of saints and angels is gathered before Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 12:18-24).

The New Testament continually assumes the continuity in renewal of the true people of God. It is not by historical accident that the discipline, officers, and worship of the church are so closely related to the synagogue.

Paul declares, “We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). Debating with the lawyer hired by the Jerusalem hierarchy, Paul insisted that Christianity is not a sect, but the way of the God of the fathers (Acts 24:5, 14). The controversy over circumcision highlights the claim of the church to be the true Israel. Had the church been understood as an assembly of “God-fearers” distinct from Judaism, the demand for circumcision would never have been made. The scandal was the admission of the Gentiles into the number of the people of God without circumcision.

The final “people of God’s own possession” must be one. As there is one Father over all (Eph. 4:6), so there is one family,<sup>3</sup> one “fatherdom” (πάτρια, Eph. 3:15). Members of God’s family form a “brotherhood” (ἀδελφότης, I Pet. 2:17; 5:9). Gentiles who, outside of Christ were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel are now fellow-citizens with the people of God and heirs of the covenant promises (Eph. 2:12, 19).

Because there is one true people of God on earth, there remains a “theopolitical” structure and calling for the church. It is not the structure of the kingdoms of the world. To apply to the world the form of the church is a sacralizing process that is just as illegitimate as the secularizing process that would apply to the church the forms of the world. Yet the fact that the church does not possess a worldly political structure does not mean that it possesses no political structure whatever. The “politics” of the kingdom are the pattern, purpose, and dynamic by which God orders the life of the heavenly *polis* in this world. Only as it conforms to this heavenly pattern is the church a city set on a hill, given as salt to preserve the world from corruption and a light to point the way to salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> This further supported by Jesus’ giving the power of the keys to all the apostles in Matthew 18:18.

<sup>3</sup> The phrases *πάσα πατρία* (Eph. 3:15) and *πάσα οἰκοδομή* (2:21) are best translated “the whole family” and “the whole building.”

Christ built his church on the confessing Peter; the apostle whose faith is given by revelation of the Father. Since only the Son can reveal the Father and only the Father can reveal the Son (Matt. 11:27), human wisdom cannot bring in the kingdom. Long ago the Qumran covenanters recognized from the Old Testament that the community of God must be founded upon the truth, the revealed mysteries of God.<sup>4</sup> But only in Jesus Christ is that foundation of truth laid. The frantic efforts to build contemporary society in the void leads surely to new mythologies, to the cult of Hitler, Lenin, or Mao.<sup>5</sup>

The heavenly discipline of the church corresponds to the heavenly origin of its apostolic faith. Jesus commits to Peter and to the other disciples (Matt. 18:18) the authority of the keys of the kingdom, giving earthly form to the heavenly community. The keys of the kingdom close the fellowship against the man who refuses apostolic doctrine or who will not receive correction and repent of an offense against a brother (Matt. 18:17, 18).<sup>6</sup> The heavenly sanction of earthly judgment implies that the apostles confess Christ's authority. Christ gives the keys, even as he brings the kingdom. The authority of the keys is only spiritual in the sense that temporal judgment awaits God's judgment on the last day,<sup>7</sup> but it is *fully* spiritual in the sense that a final and heavenly authority is effective: the man who refuses to hear the word of Christ is at last outside God's eternal kingdom.

Paul reflects on the eschatological character of judgment in the church when he rejects with dismay the practice of permitting secular courts to adjudicate disputes between Christians. Since Christians will one day judge the world and even the angels, the least of the saints is well qualified to settle disputes about affairs of this life (I Cor. 6:1-4). The wisdom of the Spirit of the age to come is already given to the church.

The exercise of heavenly judgment must in fact begin in the house of God (I Pet. 4:17). The church is

not now called to judge the nations; those outside the church God will judge (I Cor. 5:12,13). But those within must judge themselves (I Cor 11:31) and be judged by their brethren (I Cor. 5:12).

As a heavenly community the church must deal with the temporal concerns of its members, yet its discipline remains spiritual, not temporal. For example, the church could require a Christian storekeeper to refund purchases that had been gained by misleading advertising, but if the member refused, the church's final earthly sanction would be excommunication, not economic boycott.

The heavenly community of Christ is called to an earthly pilgrimage. The people of God may not abandon the program of his kingdom—"if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him" (Rom 8:18). Paul rebukes the triumphalists at Corinth: "ye have come to reign without us: yea, and I would that ye did reign, that we might also reign with you" (I Cor. 4:8). We may not wish to condemn Christians who in persecution that seemed beyond endurance turned upon their persecutors, but Christ does not call his church to Camisard rebellion. Rather, he gives that grace that enabled the Huguenot galley-slave to call his chains the chains of Christ's love.

"We have not here an abiding city, but we seek after that which is to come" (Heb. 13:14). There is no earthly city that abides—not Babylon, not Rome, not Jerusalem. Every kingdom of man will be shaken, every wall shall fall (Heb. 12:27; Ezek. 38:20). Yet the author of Hebrews is reflecting not only on the fact that there is no abiding city here, but on the truth that Christians are not given one. The military and police power needed to maintain a political community in this world cannot be sought in Christ's name. Rather, Christians are called to go with Christ outside the walls of the city, bearing his reproach (Heb. 13:12, 13).

Christ commanded Peter to put up his sword (Jn. 18:11). He declared to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then

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<sup>4</sup> The "council" **סוד** of the community is founded upon the "counsel" **סוד** of God.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Les Nouveaux Possédés* (Fayard, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> "Binding" and "loosing" was applied both to practices and persons in Jewish usage. The teaching and governing aspects of apostolic authority are both in view.

<sup>7</sup> Although God may visit judgment sooner: Acts 5:1-11.

would my servants fight” (Jn. 18:36). Yet Christ is not helpless against Pilate: his kingdom that is not of this world rules over all the kingdoms that are of this world. Pilate’s power is given from above (Jn. 19:11). By the will of the Father Pilate rules; by the will of the Father the Beloved Son is given up.

Christ’s servants *need* not fight because God’s kingdom does not need their weapons; they *may* not fight because God’s kingdom of redemption cannot be established by the sword. “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God. . . .” (II Cor. 10:4,5).

The helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness that God takes to deliver his people (Isa. 59:17) are the weapons of the Spirit given by Christ for the struggle, not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12-18). The sword of the Spirit prevails where physical weapons are useless.

Three principles apply, then, in God’s restraint upon the sword for the community of his kingdom: first, the principle that God has taken the sword of judgment into his own hand because the time of the judgment of the world has come. To be sure, God in rich mercy delays the day of his wrath. Yet the Judge of the nations is already seated on the throne of his power; the message of the kingdom does not call for soldiers to put the King on his throne but for penitents to confess their ruling Sovereign and sue for his mercy.

In the second place, the Lord’s restraint of the sword reflects his moving of the conflict to deeper levels. His triumph over the powers of darkness is a triumph not only of spiritual judgment but of redeeming grace. Paul, the chief of sinners, is made a captive of Christ’s love, chained by grace to the chariot of Christ’s triumph (II Cor. 2:14). To effect his victory Christ refused the temptation to use the authority of the kingdom to provide earthly bread, to gain visible assurance of God’s protection, or to receive the political reality of rule from the Prince of this world. Christ calls his church to the same conflict and the same obedience.

Finally, God’s restraint upon the sword for the

bringing in of his kingdom is related to God’s sanction of the sword in the hands of the rulers of this world. God did not first give the sword to Israel as a priestly nation but to “all flesh” after the flood to restrain violence (Gen. 9:6). The holy wars of Israel were divinely commissioned not for this purpose but to foreshadow the final wrath of God’s judgment. Apart from these judgments, Israel was to bring blessing to the nations and their rulers. The value of God’s wisdom for governors is a major theme of the wisdom literature. In Israel’s exile, Daniel was counsellor to kings; the role of Cyrus as God’s servant in restoring the nation from captivity anticipates the messianic Deliverer. “Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant” (Jer. 27:6) is granted dominion by God not only over Judah but the surrounding nations of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon.

The captives in Babylon are told to build houses and dwell in them, give their children in marriage and be multiplied. “And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the Lord for it; for in the peace thereof shall you have peace” (Jer. 29:7).

So too the dispersion of the new Israel are to pray for the rulers in the lands where they are scattered (I Tim. 2:1,2). That duty does not conflict with the Christian’s service of the Lord. Jesus’s answer to the question about paying taxes to Caesar has a double edge.<sup>8</sup> The rule of Caesar is acknowledged even while his claims to deity are set aside. Since the image on the coin is Caesar’s, those who are under his rule have an obligation to give him what is his. But since man himself bears God’s image, he must render to God all that he is.

Paul elaborates on this teaching of Christ when he charges Christians to obey human government for conscience’s sake, since “the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom.13:1). Paul assumes that rulers are ministers of God for good. It is a fair implication of his teaching that if a ruler so subverts the business of governing that the state becomes a terror to good works rather than evil, the Christian conscience would be no longer bound. In judging the good or evil performance of the state the Christian may not, however, judge the state as a form of the people of God but only as an ordinance given to all men to preserve life.

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<sup>8</sup> See Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (N.Y.: Scribner’s Sons, 1956), pp. 34-37.



The distinction between the state as the form of the city of this world and the church as the form of the heavenly city remains essential.

Christ's heavenly authority controls the nations but they are not thereby made his disciples. His headship over all things is distinguished from his headship over the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that fills all in all (Eph. 1:21-23).

To be sure, the life of the worldly kingdoms is influenced by the life of the church in their midst; the people of God are like salt to preserve the world from its corruption; the kingdom works as a leaven, penetrating the world with the influence of Christian faith, hope, and love. Yet even the world-wide spread of the gospel cannot remove Christ's prohibition of the sword as a means of bringing in or maintaining his kingdom.

The church and only the church is established by Jesus Christ as the earthly form of the new and heavenly people of God. It cannot be set beside other structures of human life, for it is the structure of the new humanity in Christ. The family remains as the institution of God for the propagation of life; the state remains as the institution of God for the preservation of life. The church is neither competitive nor correlative. It does not give institutional form to one aspect of human experience, the "spiritual" or the life of faith. The church visible is not an association for conducting public worship. To suppose that the body of Christ finds institutional expression in both the church and the state as religious and political spheres is to substitute a sociological conception of the church for the teaching of the New Testament. Christ does not give the keys of the kingdom to Caesar, nor the sword to Peter before the *parousia*. The church is the new nation (I Pet. 2:9), the new family of God (Eph. 3:15). The covenantal family of the patriarchal period and the covenantal nation after Moses demonstrate that the people of God are formed in a way that respects the structures of life in the world, but they also demonstrate that the electing grace of God's kingdom cannot be fulfilled within these structures.

Christ himself provides the new form with the new life. The church has the spiritual and eschatological form that the kingdom demands. It is contrasted, not with the family or with the state, but with the world as the corporate structure of unbelief.

The relation of the church to the social structures

of this world varies with the nature of the structure. The family, as a form of God's creation, is restored in relation to the church in a way that the state, an institution made necessary by the fall, is not. In God's kingdom there is restoration of creation, fulfillment of the ordinances of God for a fallen world, and anticipation of the new creation. Each of these principles applies to families within the church of God: monogamous marriage is restored, the husband's headship of the home is maintained but transformed, and the calling of men and women in the church anticipates the new order in Christ in which there is neither male nor female. Yet even the family is not identified with the new order of the kingdom. Those who are not willing to renounce family ties for Christ's sake cannot be his disciples (Matt. 10:34-39). Christians are further instructed in the holiness of the kingdom that permits them to remain in marital alliance with unbelievers—in sharp contract with the requirements of the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant (I Cor. 7:14).

The church as the family of God provides the earthly bonds of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters that constitute the eternal reality foreshadowed in the creation ordinance of the family (Mk. 3:34f; 10:29,30). The marriage bond itself is more than an allegory of the mystery of Christ's union with the church. Rather it is a prefigurement: a unique union of jealous love that prepares us to understand something of the intensity of devotion that joins the Lord with his people.

Since the church anticipates the form of the world to come, it transcends the social and political forms of this world. Yet the church cannot for that reason be set over these institutions. The claim of Boniface VIII to the two swords has been rightly discredited in Biblical ecclesiology. The discipline of the church may declare a man outside the kingdom of heaven, but it cannot prejudice his earthly citizenship or dissolve his marriage. We have seen the folly of papal interdictions placing kingdoms under the ban to accomplish political ends. Contemporary secular theology follows the same course in support of world revolution.

Christianity cannot be revived by linking it to man's political hopes, nor can Marxism be given a new dynamic by the infusion of Christian hope. Moltmann has sought to politicize Christian theology by orienting it to the future. His "pro-ligion" joins

“faith in God with hope in the liberation of man on a new earth and under a new heaven.”<sup>9</sup> A Christian universalism of hope “makes meaningful and relevant the political humanism of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup>

But Christian eschatology cannot be cut loose from the past of redemption. The choice is not between past and future but between the gospel and humanism. Christian eschatology cannot link with political utopianism any better than Christian soteriology can link with political messianism. Christian hope awaits the return of Jesus Christ, the same Lord who rose from the dead on the third day and who will come to judge the living and the dead (II Thess. 1:7). The world of the future is not the better world of the humanist dream but a new world when creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the sons of God (Rom. 8:20, 21). “For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subject all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:20,21).

The politics of the kingdom of heaven is the politics of faith, hope, and love: faith that confesses the risen Savior, hope that looks for his appearing, love that is inflamed by his sacrifice on the cross. Only the realism of resurrection hope can sustain the Christian as a pilgrim traveling home.

The Christian will be charged with otherworldliness, aloofness, non-involvement. He cannot forget his heavenly citizenship to be conformed to this world. He refuses to make patriotism or revolution his religion or a socialist utopia his hope. He sees the native and the apostasy of secular hope.

Yet the church is not a retreat where the pious await the parousia. The church has an agenda, set not by the world but by the Lord. Christ commissioned the church to live for the purpose for which he lived and died. The urgency of the priorities of his Father’s will governed his earthly obedience. In his heavenly glory he sends his disciples to the nations with the same purpose. Christ’s great commission expresses the “political” objectives of his kingdom—the evangeli-

zation and edification of the nations in adoring fellowship with the Triune God.

The church is organized for these ends: the worship of God, the nurture and growth of God’s people, and the bearing of witness to the world. For each of these ministries the church is endowed with gifts of the Spirit by the exalted Christ. First, the Word of God must be ministered to these ends: Christ enables every Christian to confess his name before men and exhort his brethren in the truth. So, too, Christ grants gifts of order to discipline the church in love. The pilgrim church must also minister mercy, caring for the poor and the distressed among the brethren, and as God grants opportunity, to all men.

Christ has not promised to make us wise in world politics, skillful in technology, or talented in the arts. Love of the Lord brings fruitful living in all his creation. But Christians live as stewards, respecting the priorities of the kingdom. The Christian labors, not to amass wealth but to have to give to the needy; the man who has everything lives only to give it to the Lord in faithful stewardship. He lives as possessing nothing. The man who has nothing is a child of the King, possessing everything. Christ’s redemption does not improve our efficiency in worldly living. It is the purchase of the King who claims us for himself and his program. To do all to the glory of God does not mean that any conceivable activity can glorify God.

The world cannot be sacralized by the fiat of the new theology to form the community of love Christ came to establish. The world lacks the new life of the Spirit who sheds abroad the love of Christ in human hearts. It cannot be governed by the spiritual structure of Christ’s kingdom. It is the church that possesses the Spirit, and indeed is possessed by the Spirit to manifest on earth now the realities of heaven and the age to come. The politics of the kingdom demand that Christians take seriously the structure of the church as the form of the people of God on earth. Today the church stands not so much as an institution as a ruin. Preachers of another gospel are not only tolerated; they control the church. The church is in Babylonian captivity to secular goals and values. While radical theologians serve the political left, there is no lack of

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (N.Y., Scribner’s, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

## MARS HILL AUDIO

### *Resource Essay*

conservative preachers to proclaim a fascist nationalism in the name of Christ. No longer does the church's ministry of mercy bear witness to the compassion of Christ's gospel. Instead, Christians spend on extravagant luxuries the funds Christ has entrusted to them for the relief of the poor and needy.

The deep fellowship of love that joins the Lord's people finds little expression in churches that meet for one brief hour of formal boredom every Sunday morning. Evangelism has been shifted by default to para-ecclesiastical organizations, many presenting a

truncated gospel, and most by their very specialization detaching the gospel from the life of a serving and loving community.

It is time for judgment to begin in the house of God. Let the church break with the deadening customs that have stifled its living service of the Lord. Let it put in practice the politics of the kingdom, and a reformed church will show the world the meaning of true life in community. It will also find an open door that no man can shut in proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of history and salvation.      Ω