

Rendering to Caesar, Surrendering to God

BY KEITH PUTT

We cannot reduce Christian faithfulness to any political, cultural, or social program, since inevitably these fail to realize fully God's justice, grace, and promise. How should the church maintain its prophetic, alien voice in our culture, given society's significant commitment to liberal, capitalist democracy?

We must be wary of allying Christian faith too intimately with culture and politics. Our faithfulness should not be reduced to any particular political, cultural, or social program, since inevitably these will fail to realize fully God's justice, grace, and promise. As Christians we perennially struggle with the tension between relevance and identity. Christ placed the church *in* the world and commissioned it to go forth *into* the world in order to disseminate the good news of salvation; consequently, the church must strive to be relevant to whatever culture it inhabits so as to gain a hearing and, thereby, fulfill Christ's mission. Yet, in the need for relevancy, the church must never compromise its identity; it must distinguish itself as different from the world for the purpose of maintaining a prophetic or critical edge. For how can the church denounce any evil, violence, or oppression resident in society, if it is so immersed in the secular that its voice sounds like every other worldly voice? How can the church speak against sin, if it partners with those earthly principalities and powers that propagate sin?

In our culture many Christians have sought to correlate their biblical and theological traditions with a significant commitment to freedom, democracy, and capitalism. The two books reviewed here take different

approaches to this correlation and reach substantially different conclusions about the political implications for the church.

A PROPHEPIC, ALIEN VOICE

Consider the stir caused by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore when he placed a granite monument bearing the Ten Commandments in the lobby of the state judicial building. Is the Decalogue an abstract set of rational principles that gives direction for civil justice, or does it prescribe, and therefore promote, a particular religious tradition? I suspect that Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon would adopt the latter perspective; they would consider the judge's action to be not only unconstitutional, but also evangelically inappropriate. In *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989; 175 pp., \$14.00) they warn that the church has so assimilated itself into civil religiosity that it considers its purpose to be "assisting the secular state in its presumption to make a better world for its citizens" (156). In this accommodationist attitude toward modern, liberal democracy, the church has reduced its revolutionary narrative of Jesus Christ and his revelation of the Kingdom of God, to abstract, socio-politically prudent truisms. Judge Moore's action is surely an example of such a reduction, ripping the Decalogue out of its redemptive narrative of God's liberation of Israel and framing it on the court's wall as if the Commandments were merely ahistorical, commonsensical criteria for creating good citizens.

Such postings of the Decalogue are an instance of Christians leaning over to address the world, but falling into the world instead, as if into an abyss. Such actions soften, if not silence, the church's prophetic, alien voice, which was divinely intended to speak words of conviction and redemption to a world that operates consistently in an attitude of functional paganism (27). Christians in America have embraced a bourgeois ethic of autonomous individuality, tolerance, and inclusiveness, Hauerwas and Willimon write. In the process we have transformed the church, the "spiritual body of Christ," from an eschatological community of disciples living the Sermon on the Mount into just another "consumer-oriented organization, existing to encourage individual fulfillment" (33). Indeed the church, in both its politically liberal and conservative expressions, has deceived itself into thinking that it holds a divine mandate to promote American democracy. It engages in the politics of compromise, confusing and fusing the power of God with the power of Caesar; it reduces Christianity to a "public church" by enacting laws to ensure that Christian ethics no longer remains the sole responsibility of Jesus' disciples who live faithfully as a colony of the Kingdom of God, but becomes the ideological foundation for a civil religion. When it so totally invests itself in the economic and political markets of American Enlightenment culture, the church deteriorates into a "conspiracy of cordiality," given over to pacifying and not preaching (138).

Only the purifying power of the biblical narratives about the Kingdom of God, Hauerwas and Willimon argue, can wash away this stain of civil religion. The church must re-examine what story it should be telling and living, and thereby rethink its identity. It must recapture its character as a sojourning community, that is, as resident aliens in a “pagan” world. Christians should interpret themselves as a cadre of sojourning Kingdom dwellers, who manifest their commitment to Christ by living out his story through faithful obedience to the revolutionary ethics he personified and proclaimed (62). Instead of trying to pencil the church into the text of secular stories, we should inscribe the church clearly into the margins of those stories. We should critique and correct the world’s narratives of power by repeating in word and deed the revolutionary story of Jesus and his sacrifice—a story which is characterized not by triumphalism but engagement—through the non-coercive power of God’s grace and love.

THE GOSPEL AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Robert P. Kraynak, in *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in a Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 334 pp., \$24.95), agrees that we should be wary of an artificial correlation between Christianity and contemporary liberal democracy (which, for Kraynak, encompasses politically conservative as well as liberal expressions that hold personal freedom as the highest good and see government as a protector of our individual visions of the good). He does not mean that Christians should encourage, or even passively endorse, an oppressive political process; but he does defend the controversial thesis that liberal democracy may not be the political system most consonant with the gospel.

Christianity does not need liberal democracy, Kraynak insists. Liberal democracy, however, needs Christianity. Here’s why: liberal democracy flourishes only when its citizens can ground their belief in universal human rights in some well-established, rich theory of

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human dignity (18). Christianity provides that theory, because it says all human beings are created in God’s image. Ironically, liberal democracy, by itself, has not provided a satisfactory theory about human dignity, because it has depended on a secular philosophical perspective that promotes epistemological and moral relativism. In other words, it says that we cannot know, because there cannot be, any objective reality for any good, includ-

ing human dignity. Just as people disagree about which art, music, or ideas are good, they disagree about which patterns of living are good, and there is no standard for deciding who is correct. Indeed, this is why art in a democratic society sinks to the lowest common denominator, resulting in a mediocre pop culture that replaces Mozart with the Beatles and Gregorian

Chant with folk music (27).

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Our modern notion of liberal democracy, he suggests, is based on philosopher Immanuel Kant's model of personal freedom that skews and reduces the image of God to respect for inalienable human rights.

Yet, in both Scripture and

church tradition, the *imago Dei* has little, if anything, to do with human freedom, reason, or rights, but everything to do with duty to God, our dependence on revelation, the recognition of original sin, the superiority of the common good over individual rights, and the significance of Christian charity as sacrificial love (152-53). Kraynak prescribes a dose of biblical and historic Christian tradition as the only inoculation against this modern Kantian contamination of true Christian democracy.

If we swallowed the correct dosage of these traditions, what would our society be like? Surprisingly, Kraynak thinks it would not result in anything like Christian democracy. Biblical and historic Christianity, according to Kraynak, dictate the embracing of patriarchal and hierarchical forms of family and church (208). Consequently, the most suitable form of government would be constitutional monarchy. Admitting that the New Testament does not dictate a particular form of secular government, Kraynak claims that in both Scripture and the history of the church, there is much support for a monarchical government that gives political power to a wise emperor or king. Under such a regime, the spiritual realms of church, family, and Christian charities would be protected from oppression. Non-denominational prayer would be allowed in school; faith-based welfare programs would be favored; pro-life and pro-family legislation would promote monogamous, heterosexual marriages and establish serious obstacles to divorce; certain forms of feminism that lead to ordained women priests or women in combat might be curbed; and government would be "promoting orthodoxy" and perhaps a particular religious confession (223-24).

CONCLUSION

We do need to reevaluate the church's stance toward any socio-political structure, especially the predominant American structure of liberal, capitalist democracy. For too long, and with too much vigor, some Christian

groups have tried to collapse biblical Christianity into modern autonomous individualism and liberal free-market capitalism. These political and economic forms have much to commend them, and personally, I would not want to live within other structures. However, to identify them with the Kingdom of God is tantamount to idolatry, by raising what is merely good for a time and place to the level of what is ultimately good. Hauerwas, Willimon, and Kraynak write as prophets. They remind us that the church must be an engaged, counter-cultural organization that gives ultimate allegiance only to God as revealed in Christ and made known through the Spirit, and lives out the Christian narrative critically and compassionately within any and every form of government.

Precisely at this point, I am troubled by Kraynak's insistence that a monarchical form of government best allows the church to pursue its mission. Historically, the church sometimes has preferred hierarchical forms of government, but I question his interpretation of key scriptural texts used to support this preference for hierarchy. He correctly notes that the New Testament does not prescribe a specific political structure, but then he moves, somewhat unpredictably, to prescribe constitutional monarchy, which legislates politically conservative social positions and perhaps approves a specific confessional tradition.

Hauerwas and Willimon are the better guides here. They propose no specific political organization, but require only that the church remain committed to living out the narratives of Israel and Jesus. They, more than Kraynak, realize the impossibility of fully realizing God's Kingdom on earth, and maintain the tension between relevance and identity. They keep alive the prophetic insistence on God's justice and promise.



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