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4 ways Protestants approach the government (video)

by REV. BEN JOHNSON • November 13, 2018



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Is participating in government a duty or a sin? When Christians have asked how they should engage the public square, Protestant leaders' responses have run the gamut from complete separation (because "this world is not my home") to the belief that government service is

“the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life.” How should Bible-believing Christians look at their competing views?

Rev. Richard Turnbull, Ph.D. analyzed four historic teachings about the Christian’s role in public life. “Essentially, these approaches represent differing conceptions of the relationship of nature and grace,” said Rev. Turnbull, who is ordained in the Church of England and director of the Oxford-based **Centre for Enterprise, Morality, and Ethics (CEME)**.

The four primary ways Protestants have said Christians should approach politics are:

1. Martin Luther: Two Kingdoms: Grace alongside nature

The father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, said the Christian belongs to “two kingdoms” which stand alongside each other, distinct but not hostile. The temporal kingdom, or earthly government, upholds order and suppresses violence. Its authority extends to all people, believers and unbelievers alike. The spiritual government, or the church, extends eternal life only to believers.

Luther taught, in a 1523 work known as “**Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed**,” that Christians should “satisfy at the same time God’s kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly.” If called to serve the government, a Christian should do so “by whatever means you can, with body, soul, honor or goods,” because its services are “profitable for the whole world.”

“Therefore,” Luther wrote, “should you see that there is a lack of hangmen, **beadles**, judges, lords, or princes, and find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the place, that necessary government may by no means be despised and become inefficient or perish.” Since Christ upholds the power of government, even knotting the noose is a “divine service.”

Luther wrote in this work that the state should not punish heretics. “Belief or unbelief is a matter of every one’s conscience,” he wrote, so “the secular power ... [should] attend to its own affairs and permit men to believe one thing or another.”

This model sees grace acting parallel to nature, with government being one **vocation** for people of true faith to **serve** their neighbors.

2. John Calvin: Transformational model: Grace within, or transforming, nature

John Calvin saw government as an “order established by God” and “constituted by God’s ordinance.”

The ruler should see that “the public quiet be not disturbed, that every man’s property be kept secure, that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other, that honesty and modesty be cultivated,” Calvin wrote in **Book 4, chapter 20**, of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

However, the polity also has a role in preserving “a public form of religion” by preventing “public blasphemy” and assuring “that no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offences to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people.”

A wise ruler must guard against both extremes of implementing the laws, “excessive severity” and “soft and dissolute indulgence” of lawlessness.

Calvin reacted against Pietists who disregard earthly authority (see below), writing that “no man can doubt that civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life.”

This model sees grace acting through, and transforming, the public order. Christians should serve in order to uphold public religion.

3. Pietist Anabaptists: Separation from the world: Grace against nature

The Pietists saw earthly government as “ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ,” in the words of the **Schleitheim Confession** of 1527. They called for Anabaptists to “withdraw from Babylon and the earthly Egypt.”

As such, they held, “It is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate, because ... [t]he government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian’s is according to the Spirit.”

Oaths of office and military defense similarly have no place in Christian life within this tradition. Christians must foreswear “the unchristian, devilish weapons of force – such as sword, armor and

the like, and all their use, either for friends or against one's enemies."

This model sees grace as entirely outside the public square, residing only in the Christian fellowship or the soul of the believer.

Engagement with government cannot take place.

4. "Christian" socialism: Transformation of the Church by the State: Grace equals, or is under, nature

Rev. Turnbull touched briefly on **"Christian" socialism**. (If only more Christians gave the concept less of their attention.) The vision, which gained particular credence in the Anglican communion, continues to enjoy the advocacy of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. "Archbishop Welby was effectively espousing a form of Christian socialism in his **speech to the Trades Union Congress**" this September, Rev. Turnbull said.

"I dream that governments, now and in the future, put church-run food banks out of business," **Welby said**. His address followed **more than a century** of Anglican bishops clamoring for social welfare to displace church charity.

Socialism is not just an economic system but a comprehensive worldview. It teaches that private property causes conflict and wealth redistribution will change every human being's character. Christianity says this change comes about only by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In the Religious Left's view, Turnbull said, "society is indeed to be transformed, but not by the Gospel, but by a governmental, socialist program." Grace is immersed, or subsumed, by the functions of the state.

He went on to analyze the contributions of **Abraham Kuyper**, the Dutch Reformed theologian and prime minister of the Netherlands, who taught the Bible's "dominating principle" is "the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos." Kuyper famously **said**, "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!'"

You can watch Rev. Turnbull's full explanation in the video below. His historical overview begins 16 minutes into the lecture and lasts just 10 minutes. His full address repays careful viewing, as does the **full conference**:



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Roger McKinney · 5 months ago

Nice summary. The only government God (Jesus is part of the trinity) ever created was the one he gave Israel in the Torah through Moses. It had no human exec, no legislature, no taxes and no police force. It had only courts to adjudicate 613 laws, most of which were religious ceremony. This was a libertarian's dream. Yet, all Protestant commentaries I have read on that government say it failed and that the monarchy ushered in Israel's golden years. They ignore the fact that 1) God created that government, 2) he was very angry at Israel for demanding a king, 3) Israel was far more immoral under the kings than under the judges. Under the judges, Israel never became so depraved as to offer child sacrifice and that was common under the kings. Under the judges, there was no state, princes or kings to steal the property of the poor, yet that was the most common complaint of the prophets against Israel under monarchy. Finally, God punished idolatry under the judges with temporary rule by other nations, but under the monarch the nation became so rebellious and evil that God sent them into exile for 70 years and destroyed the temple Solomon built. I can see no reason to think Israel was better off under the kings but that's what all Protestant theologians claim.

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