

Response to the Theos lecture 'God and Government' by Bishop Tom Wright, 10 February 2010, Portcullis House, Parliament

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With characteristic insight and robustness, Bishop Tom has reminded us how a de-politicized Gospel is a travesty of biblical truth. He's shown us how, if the crucified and risen Christ is Lord of all the nations, government has to matter to those who seek to follow Christ. Yet if government is indeed under Christ, it can never be seen as the ultimate horizon of human life. And this radical confession isn't simply a theological ideal hovering above reality. It had tangible historical effects in our culture. In downgrading the Roman state to the level of a mere servant of justice, Jesus and Paul created the possibility in the West – for the first time – of humble, limited government. As one writer put it, the appearance of the Church in the ancient pagan world answering to another, higher Lord brought about the 'de-divinization' of the state, and laid a crucial basis for what we experience today as a free civil society and a government expected to work for the public good.

This is a remarkable achievement. The book, *God and Government*,¹ spells out both its negative and its positive implications. Negatively, government must recognize the limits of its authority and power - government can't solve every problem, thank goodness – and it needs to be continually reminded of this, all the more, it seems, the longer it remains in power. But Christianity does not support the minimal government idealized in classical liberalism. It calls government to a positive and necessary role - edging society closer to whatever limited justice is attainable in a fallen world and in the circumstances of the time. 'Limited justice' might not make for an inspiring election cry, but for the most vulnerable members of our society and our interconnected world, it can mean the difference between dignity and degradation, even life and death. And politicians and citizens who have their eyes of faith on the future reign of universal justice under Jesus Christ will always find resources of hope to carry on the struggle for justice even in face of the worst political disappointments.

In living this out in the daily round of political activity, we need to reckon with what politics is. Politics is always unfinished business; it labours under the law of unintended consequences; it's extremely hard work; it's often bad tempered; and it's never neat. As the sociologist Max Weber famously said, it is the 'slow boring of hard boards'. That said, the moral convictions that politicians bring to their task – and those by which citizens assess them - are decisive in shaping

¹ Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds., *God and Government* (SPCK, 2009).

how well governments live up to their calling. More than ever now, we need more 'conviction politicians'.

It hardly needs pointing out that today we inhabit a society in which many competing moral convictions vie for public influence. This can easily create a sense of insecurity and defensiveness among Christians, especially those who still harbour the memory of being in charge. But Christian politicians who share the biblical vision set out by Bishop Tom will surely want in the first instance to draw deeply on the resources of their own faith perspective – and not only on their partisan ideological traditions or the views of their voters – in forming their convictions about public justice. *God and Government* is one attempt to offer them a glimpse into those resources, to aid them on their way as they share in this honourable task of public service. It's also an invitation to them to reflect critically on their chosen political affiliations and the broad policy standpoints that flow from them, and not merely baptize them with a veneer of theological rationalization.

Well, readers will be the judge of how well the book succeeds in that aim. But let me very briefly highlight two of its specific goals. One is to put back on the table the seriously neglected insights of the traditions of Christian political thought beginning in biblical times and extending right up to the 20th century. This is a patchy and sometimes ugly story, to say the least, but it's one we need to retrieve and critically test for our own times. In this period, core ideas such as equal human dignity, distributive and retributive justice, the common good, the rule of law, representation and accountability, and many more, began to take shape and then feed into the foundations of the modern political systems we still enjoy today. What we call liberal democracy did not spring fully formed from the womb of Enlightenment secularism, and – as Bishop Tom pointed out – those who seek a wholesale secularization of public life will be depriving our political systems of invaluable moral sources – as even the secularist philosopher Jürgen Habermas has acknowledged.

Another goal of the book is to clarify how a wide-angled biblical vision can actually begin to shape concrete political practice for those who draw on it. The book cites that great Christian social thinker Richard Tawney, who had some scorching words for 'churchmen' who claim to have something distinctive to say about politics. They should, he says, 'state fearlessly and in unmistakable terms what precisely they think that contribution to be. If they do not, let them cease reiterating secondhand platitudes which disgust sincere men and bring Christianity into contempt'. Well, he's surely not demanding that theologians write party manifestos. I think we should receive his challenge as implying that all Christians in politics should spell out the consequences of their larger theological and moral principles for concrete public policy, in specific ways and in unsanctimonious language. So, for example, it's just not enough simply to say that because 'the earth is the Lord's' we should therefore 'deal with global

warming'. Effective political reasoning moves through a series of stages from broad principles like 'care for the earth' to middle level objectives like 'maintaining a sustainable environment' to more and more detailed policy directives like 'the polluter pays', down to specific administrative mechanisms like how much they pay and what sanctions should be imposed if they don't. Getting down and dirty with policy details like that – and then trying to build the coalitions required to put them into effect - just is the stuff of politics. It's the bread and butter of most politicians' normal days. But when Christian politicians are busy with these seemingly mundane political activities, they are not – or they should not be - leaving faith behind and dealing with merely 'technical', 'pragmatic', or 'secular' issues. The details of manifestos and white papers and pieces of legislation are where high principle – including theological principle – actually hit the ground. And they are where our convictions succeed, or fail, in edging policy that bit closer to the limited justice which government, under God, must seek.

But speaking of 'government under God' doesn't mean privileging Christian faith in public life or disrespecting those who are motivated by very different convictions. It simply means that Christian politicians and citizens will be free to speak in a way that is consistent with their deepest beliefs – something they must grant freely to others as well. The goal of democratic politics is always to seek a workable consensus on matters of political justice. But in a plural society like ours, this must be an honest consensus forged out of respect for difference, not a forced consensus requiring us all to speak in a secular Esperanto. Here's how journalist Paul Vallely puts the challenge this presents - and it's not just one for Christians:

The key question is can we now find a way of creating something positive and healthy from this crucible, or are we sleepwalking into an age of confrontation and blind defensiveness...We need to do something more than contain or translate that which we fear and do not understand. We need to find a balance which maintains the secularist separation of church and state but which allows the thinking and acting of religions to play their part in shaping the post-atheist culture which is forming all round us. It is the search for a new political language, and it is a massive a vital task.²

If the chapters of this book in some way assist Christians with a political vocation to make a considered Christian contribution to that process, it will have achieved its aim. And on behalf of us all, I want to thank Bishop Tom for inspiring us once again to take up that challenge.

² Paul Vallely, 'Private spheres, public squares,' *Third Way* 31.5 (June 2008), p17. By 'secularist separation of church and state', I take Vallely to mean a separation of jurisdictions, not a subordination of the state to a secularist ideology. For more on this, see my *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (Theos 2008).