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Biblical Principles of Reform and Regeneration: An Intellectual Framework for Christians Addressing Social Change

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Introduction

This paper seeks to provide Biblical perspective on social and cultural reform. At the time of this writing, much upheaval in the form of a pandemic, race riots, and political protests have manifested both within America and abroad. In turn, these disputes have carried over into conflict within various denominations of the Church itself. In particular, debates about Critical Race Theory, the Black Lives Matter movement, the role of riots as a means for social action and change, the proper way to support as well as critique the role of police, and proper means for dealing with sexual abuse accusations have all been the subject of much debate and acrimony. It can be difficult to ascertain a Biblical perspective on all of these issues. This paper will provide some guiding Biblical themes from Scripture that are relevant to these very difficult issues today. The focus will then move to some common pitfalls the Church can easily fall into in dealing with these issues, and how these extremes can be avoided.

It was previously argued that a Biblical perspective on government requires the following: an emphasis on limited government with a covenantal structure that embodies noncentralization and federalism, an adherence to the goal of protecting inalienable rights, and an institutional separation of Church and State.¹ These concepts will be briefly discussed below and will in turn be used for evaluating possible pitfalls as the Church seeks to involve itself in the cultural, political, and social realms of society. Each of these will be discussed in further detail below.

A Biblical Framework for Government and Politics

Self-Government and Inalienable Rights

We are made in God's image and thus we possess inalienable rights: those rights that should not be taken away, nor can they be given away, specifically life, liberty, and property. These rights are supported in Scripture by virtue of being made in God's image and by various commandments from the Old Testament (Genesis 1:26, 9:6, the Ten Commandments) as well as the most basic commandment affirmed in both the Old and New Testaments to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37-40).

On the other hand, we are inflicted with sin and our free will is marred as a result: rather than choosing to know God more deeply and more fully, Adam and Eve chose the false path of trying to be as God. In that choice they became slaves to sin, and we through them (Romans 5:12-13). However, the plan of salvation was introduced through the "second Adam," Jesus Christ (Genesis 3:15). It should be noted that only Christ, and not the State can save mankind.

Thus government should have enough power to protect our inalienable rights, but not so much power that the sinful tendencies of rulers would be empowered to the point of tyranny. An off-shoot of these premises is that humans are called to self-government. We must live in the liberty that comes with obedience to God, lest we become slaves to sin (Romans 6:17-18). Slavery to sin has more than just personal impacts—it either leads us to control and exploit the rights of others or to allow ourselves to be controlled and exploited by tyrants or other oppressors (Mark 7:20-23).

¹ Kahlib J. Fischer, "Biblical Principles of Government and Criminal Justice," *Journal of Statesmanship and Public Policy* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–12.

Justice

In turn, Scripture affirms that just and fair dealings should be linked to every aspect of government—executive, legislative, and judicial, which includes prohibitions against perjury and slander.² This view of justice involves protecting the weak from the rich and powerful, as the prophets warn of impending doom on those who use their wealth to gain political influence via corruption and graft (Isaiah 10:1-2). But the Biblical view of justice goes further than that, warning that while the rich certainly exploit the poor, that the real problem of evil is a personal, spiritual one (Mark 7:21-23; 1 Timothy 6:10). Thus, the act of giving justice in Scripture not only involves giving others what they are due, whether punishment or protection (Acts 17:30-31), but also being truthful (Zech 7:9), proportional (Ex 21:23-27), direct (Deut 19:15-21, Ex. 23:1-3), impartial (Lev. 19:15; Prov 29:7, 18:5, 2 Chron 19:7).

As it is used here, justice refers to the role of the State in upholding fairness, order, and liberty. But the idea of justice also speaks to how humans should treat one another and care for the weak and poor. Keller argues that:

In the new creation we will know Jesus, the infinite fountain of love. We will love one another for his sake and for their sake. All relationships, then, will finally be right and just. So 2 Peter 3:13 says that the new heavens and new earth will be filled with *dikaiosune*—justice.³

In turn, it can be difficult to determine whether caring for the poor belongs solely to individuals and the Church or to the State in any sense. Hopefully the discussions below will bring clarity to that question.

Covenant and Sphere Sovereignty

The Biblical idea of covenant is predicated upon the above notions of *imago dei* and the importance of self-government, and stipulates that power be shared via a freely formed covenantal agreement to protect the rights of all members.⁴ The notion of covenant affirms a view of limited government by way of federalism, such as how power is shared among the States and the federal government.⁵ In fact, the impact of covenantal/federal theology by way of the Protestant Reformation played a key role in influencing America's system of government.⁶

The covenantal nature of Scripture suggests that power should be shared among various “spheres” of authority throughout society: including: a) the individual, b) the family, c) the church, d) state and local communities, e) businesses, f) non-profits, and of course, g) the national government. The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper articulated this idea of sphere

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Watke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Volumes 1 & 2. (Chicago, IL: The Moody Press, 1980): 948.

³ Timothy Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter* (New York: Viking, 2021), 155.

⁴ Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 22-23.

⁵ James W. Skillen and Society of Christian Ethics, "Covenant, Federalism, and Social Justice," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20, (2000): 113.

⁶ Donald S. Lutz, "Religious Dimensions in the Development of American Constitutionalism," *Emory Law Journal* 39, no. 1 (1990): 22.

sovereignty based upon the idea of covenant.⁷ All of these spheres are accountable to one another and must not transgress the other domains of authority. This is one reason why the institutions of Church and State must be separate, which will be discussed below. Further, these various spheres need one another. The State cannot remedy spiritual concerns, just as the Church, for instance, cannot punish injustices related to the violation of inalienable rights.

Church-State

As an expression of both a covenantal, structural approach to society, where each sphere has its own sovereignty, as well as the clear Biblical emphasis that Christ alone is the savior of mankind, it will now be argued that the institutions of Church and State are separate as a means of protecting freedom of conscience and liberty. Christ was not interested in using political or military power to enforce his kingdom (John 18:36). What results from the building of Christ's kingdom is not a military or political kingdom but the Church (John 17:20-21). Thus, we have the Doctrine of the Two Swords: the Church bears the sword of *excommunication*, which is the process of persuasion and church discipline for those who, claiming to be Christian, willingly disobey the Word of God.⁸ The State bears the sword of *execution*, which constitutes its authority to punish those who violate the inalienable rights of others, ultimately to the point of capital punishment for murder (Genesis 9:6).

The State focuses primarily on protecting our inalienable rights, and the Church deals with the spiritual facets of personal and societal evils. Crimes are a violation of inalienable rights, which as the Declaration of Independence argues, is why government exists—to protect those rights. Inalienable rights are rights given to us by God which cannot be given away or take away.⁹ The Church's primary role is preaching the Gospel and caring for the poor, part of which requires addressing the particular social and cultural evils of our time, in addition to continuing to proclaim the need for Christ to change us and free us from sin. The process of internal, spiritual change serves as the foundation for addressing many social and cultural evils, after all: damaged relationships with God and others, particularly in the case of families, often leads to public concern. It is vital, therefore, that the Church have an active and engaged role in preaching the Gospel. Where the Church abdicates, that is, when the salt loses its savor, the spiritual foundation of society will begin to crumble, leading to social problems, and then the State will overstep. Where the State oversteps, tyranny will increase.

However, it is not as clear what it means for one domain to overstep. For instance, while it is true that the Church may have the primary role in caring for the poor, the State has a role as well, especially as it relates to preventing the exploitation of the poor (Is. 10:1-2). The next section will introduce the Sin-Crime distinction as a means of hopefully clarifying the respective roles of Church and State.

⁷ Timothy Keene, "Kuyper and Dooyeweerd: Sphere Sovereignty and Modal Aspects," *Transformation* 33, no. 1 (2016): 67.

⁸ David Vandrunen, "The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and the Relationship of Church and State in the Early Reformed Tradition," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 4 (2007): 749.

⁹ Fischer, "Biblical Principles", 4.

Sin-Crime Distinction

The Sin-Crime distinction further helps us understand the different roles of Church and State: *All crimes are sins, but not all sins are crimes.*

The State prosecutes and tries to prevent crimes. Crimes are only those sins that comprise a violation of inalienable rights, whether a person's own inalienable rights (suicide, addictive/destructive behaviors, etc.) or the inalienable rights of others. If we understand that we as individuals may only use physical force to protect ourselves and others in extreme, life-threatening circumstances, we understand that the same is true of the State as well—it can only use its God-given authority and force to prevent crimes which amount to violations of inalienable rights. Meanwhile, the Church, in participation with the power of God's Word and Spirit, seeks to address other types of sin which do not equate to crime. Matters of conscience and personal obedience to the Lord, therefore, cannot be coerced with political or physical power. Of course, many laws are not directly related to protecting inalienable rights. For instance, the minutia of it being illegal to turn left on a red light may not seem to be in keeping with this distinction, and yet laws establishing order and safety, however they are constructed, are in fact centered on the notion that human life, liberty, and property should be protected and affirmed through a just and ordered society.

The implications of the sin-crime distinction help further guide the cooperative yet distinct nature of Church and State activity. For instance, *criminal behavior* is no more the province of the Church than the thought life of citizens is the province of the State. While this may seem like a straightforward division, there are at least two areas where questions of overlap can be problematic. The first would be that of hate speech, where at least to some extent, the governments of some nations are just as much concerned about the implicit racist motivations of the violator as they are about the act of violence itself. Likewise, if and when Churches treat issues of sexual abuse and violence—clear violations of inalienable rights—as simply spiritual issues, instead of reporting the crime to the police authorities, we see a problem of Church over-reach. In both cases, the solution might be that the Church deals with the spiritual, attitudinal issues, at least in part, and the State deals with the criminal actions and behaviors. For instance, the Church should lead the way in speaking against any type of hatred and violence. And while ministers should be eager to minister to all types of criminals, including sexual offenders, that would not occur outside the divine mandate of the State to punish those offenders. Meanwhile, legislation which seeks to add extra punishment for violent behavior due to concerns about misogyny or racism, might be giving the State extra-biblical authority to impose upon the thoughts and attitudes of citizens.

Therefore, the institutional separation of Church and State, as well as the related notions of sphere sovereignty and federalism, include not just sharing power within the federal government, or between the federal government and states. It also favors a grassroots spread of power, where not only state and local governments have their own spheres of autonomy, but other spheres such as families, churches, non-profits, businesses and other voluntary associations are robustly involved in mediating and addressing societal evils.¹⁰ Also included within this framework is an affirmation of the institutional separation of Church and State. These realms should always remain separate in order to ensure maximum liberty and freedom of conscience.¹¹

¹⁰ Kahlil J. Fischer, "The Power of the Covenant Idea for Leadership, Reform, and Ethical Behavior", *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 10, no. 2 (2017): 3. <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol10/iss2/13/>.

¹¹ David Vandrunen, "The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and the Relationship of Church and State in the Early Reformed Tradition," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 4 (2007): 749. DOI:10.1093/jcs/49.4.743.

The above-mentioned concepts provide a framework that helps us avoid several pitfalls, or more specifically, extremes of political engagement. These extremes often represent competing dyads of values and can be arranged in two groups per the concepts above. The first pertains to relationships between the Church and State:

- A Church which supports authoritarianism in opposition to Marxism, versus
- A Church that succumbs to structuralism and secularism

The second category focuses more on the role of the Church itself in society and the pitfalls that can occur:

- A Church that focuses only on social action versus one that succumbs to apathetic pietism
- A Church that embraces self-sufficiency and “false conservatism”
- A Church that succumbs to institutionalism, credentialism, and elitism.

These concepts will be discussed and defined below. To some extent, the two categories are related to one another, for how the Church see its role in society will by default determine how it sees the role of the State.

Avoiding Pitfalls of Church and State

Authoritarianism vs. Marxist Radicalism

The discussion will start with a very broad concern. With respect to the role of the State, the Church may face the two extremes of either supporting authoritarian regimes or those more sympathetic to radical perspectives. Ideally, neither option would be embraced; however, throughout history, various church groups, in the name of resisting Marxism, have often ended up supporting authoritarian regimes.

The term *support* can be ambiguous. Here it is differentiated from submitting to the authority of the State. Submission to the State is predicated upon the State acting within divine mandates as seen in Romans 13:1-4; specifically protecting inalienable rights and upholding justice. Otherwise, the Church, in its role of being the salt and light, is called to resist the tyranny of the State, perhaps via direct confrontation, which can and should include encouraging members to be involved in the democratic voting process, but also through other forms of subversion. The early Church, for instance, refused decrees from political leaders to halt the preaching of the Gospel and either fled persecution or met secretly.

One characteristic of this problematic relationship between Church and State appears first to be that church movements, cognizant of how Scripture confers authority upon the State (Romans 13:1-4, I Peter 2), and wary of Marxist radicalism that would seek to radically upend society, generally would support an authoritarian regime so long as that regime acknowledged church sovereignty and freedom.¹² However, as argued above, a key duty of the State is to protect inalienable rights. Any peace achieved while violating those rights is a violation of the authority (*exousia*) given to the state by God as seen in Romans 13:1-4. The Greek word for power and powers in this verse is indeed *exousia*; therefore, a better translation would be, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher *authorities*. For there is no *authority* but of God: the *authorities* that be are

¹² Ryrie, *Protestants*, 311.

ordained of God."¹³ In short, government does not have unlimited *power* to wield as it pleases; instead it must operate under the *authority* given to it by God.

This problem of church ambivalence in light of authoritarianism was seen in Germany before and during World War II, where the national Protestant Church of Germany generally supported Hitler due to his antisemitism and his opposition to Marxism. One church movement, the German Christian church, along with the *Dejudaization Institute* at Eisnach, even sought to fully support Hitler's regime, including his antisemitism. The German Christian movement, in particular, sought a "'people's church' based on blood and race".¹⁴ Many German Christians thus supported the German concept of *Volk*, which called for German nationalism, courage, self-sufficiency, and strength of spirit. Again, this concept existed well before Hitler's ascension¹⁵ and was certainly tied in with a fear of Jewish-Marxist co-option of German culture.¹⁶ The Church would therefore do well to remember that authoritarianism is not the answer to concerns about the radical Left, just as Hitler and Nazism were not the answer to Marxism.

Not all German Christians supported Hitler. The Confessing Church arose in protest and while Hitler sought to co-opt leadership of the Confessing Church, he was not fully able to thwart church resistance to his agenda.¹⁷ In any case, Hitler's response to the resistance of the Confessing Church was tepid at best.¹⁸ But even if the "Confessing Church" was more resistant and outspoken against Hitler, it generally sought to focus on its own domain. As Cremer notes, "the more decisive reason for a lack of political resistance of the Church was, however, the theological conviction that it was not the role of the Church to engage in a political overthrow, but to provide spiritual guidance and inspiration."¹⁹ It is argued here, however, that this is a mis-application of the Biblical notion of institutional separation of Church and State since after all, the Church is only the Church when it proclaims the truth of God's word to all areas of life. Thus, speaking out against tyranny and injustice is indeed part of the divine mandate and calling of the Church and should not be falsely equivocated with revolution. The prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed the truth, even to the point of martyrdom. Part of the Church's role is to be the salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16).

A related concern is that authoritarian regimes have often upheld some form of institutionalized racism. For example, we might easily make parallels between the German *volk* and American Southern support of the Southern way of life,²⁰ which included benign care of slaves, and therefore justification of the institution of slavery: "the doctrine that declared slavery or a kindred system of personal servitude the best possible condition for all labor regardless of race."²¹ Southern

¹³ James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Madison, NJ: James Strong, 1890), 802-3 of the *Concordance* followed by p. 30 from the Greek Dictionary).

¹⁴ Doris L. Bergen, "'Germany Is Our Mission: Christ Is Our Strength!' The Wehrmacht Chaplaincy and the 'German Christian' Movement," *Church History* 66, no. 3 (1997), 522. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3169455>.

¹⁵ Brian Vick, "The Origins of the German Volk: Cultural Purity and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *German Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2003): 241. doi:10.2307/1433324.

¹⁶ Paul Johnson, *Modern Times! The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 116.

¹⁷ Ryrie, *Protestants*, 318

¹⁸ Ryrie, *Protestants*, 318.

¹⁹ Tobias Cremer, "The Resistance of the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany and its Relevance for Contemporary Politics," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2019): 43, <http://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1681728>

²⁰ Wilma Dykeman, "What Is the Southern Way of Life?" *Southwest Review* 44, no. 2 (1959): 163-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43464441>.

²¹ Stanley Engerman, "The Richness of Intellectual Life in the Antebellum South." *Historically Speaking* 12, no. 5 (2011): 23. doi:10.1353/hsp.2011.0061.

support for slavery also included a very dubious theological reasoning to say the least, which infamously tried to force a connection between the curse of Ham and African slaves in America²² and also argued that slavery was a means of furthering the Gospel among slaves and thus advancing the return of Christ.²³ This perspective also apparently overlooked any notions of indentured servitude in Mosaic law, provisions which assured a voluntary and temporary arrangement between servant and master, and which afforded a host of rights which were not generally available to slaves in the Old South:

We can plainly affirm that if the three clear laws of the Old Testament had been followed in the South—that is, the anti-kidnapping, anti-harm, and anti-slave-return regulations in Exodus 21:16, 20, 26-27 and Deuteronomy 23:15-16 and 24:7—then slavery wouldn't have arisen in America.²⁴

American Southerners were not the only Christians to misread and misapply Scripture when it comes to racism, slavery, and segregation. Another example is found in South Africa, where the Dutch Reformed Church favored white culture (Afrikaners) over native residents and were in control of the structures of the society. In this case, a so-called Calvinist view of nations favored race-based associations for nationhood and restricted intermingling, similar to the “separate but equal” notion of segregation of the American South. Further, racial reconciliation was rejected, yet again, because of its perceived ties to Marxism.²⁵

Apart from racist policies, church groups have been more willing to support an authoritarian regime that claims support of religious groups, specifically in the name of overturning secular policies. The tragic irony is that many of the movements which were diametrically opposed to systemic racism were also often the same groups potentially infatuated with a secular and likely Marxist worldview. Such was the case with the emergence of the New Left in America in the early 1960's.²⁶ Even prior to that, many white Christians were at least initially concerned that Martin Luther King Jr. was implicitly supporting Marxist ideology.²⁷ Certainly, there is reason enough to believe that he was sympathetic to many Marxist views especially in his later years;²⁸ nevertheless, he always rejected the materialism inherent to Marxism.²⁹

It seems that many Christians fear that concerns about structural injustice equates to political radicalism, and thus a broad, sweeping rejection occurs of any concerns about the actual source of

²² David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, (Germany: De Gruyter, 2017), 1.

²³ Ted Booth, "Trapped by His Hermeneutic: An Apocalyptic Defense of Slavery," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 87, no. 2 (06, 2018): 160.

²⁴ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, (United States: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 132.

²⁵ Ryrie, *Protestants*, 391.

²⁶ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: a History of the Culture Wars*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 10-15.

²⁷ John Avlon, "Martin Luther King, Jr. a Communist? Why He's Been Whitewashed," *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/martin-luther-king-jr-a-communist-why-hes-been-whitewashed>.

²⁸ Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?" *History Workshop*, no. 15 (1983): 118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288462>.

²⁹ John G. West, "Martin Luther King's Powerful Critique of Scientific Racism, Scientific Materialism," *Evolution News & Science Today*, January 19, 2020, <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/01/martin-luther-kings-powerful-critique-of-scientific-racism-scientific-materialism-2/>.

structural injustice.³⁰ In the end, it would be quite tragic if concerns about racism were falsely equated with a *de facto* support of a leftist agenda. In fact, the Church should speak out against Marxism and racism, but in some cases at least, opposition to Marxism has led the Church to support authoritarianism and institutionalized racism.

Structuralism and Secularism

While the Church should avoid false equivocations between support for Marxism and opposition to racism, it should also be aware of the counterfeit nature of Marxism, which is found not in its emphasis on structural injustice, but in its emphasis on that at the expense of all else, in large part because of its secular, materialistic assumptions about life.³¹ The absence of a personal, spiritual origin to any societal problem is a staple of the Marxist mythology. To the extent that Christian movements have been enamored with that mythology is the extent to which those same movements have denigrated the truly radical nature of the Gospel, which seeks to change hearts on the way to changing social structures.

Meanwhile, this over-emphasis on structuralism from the Left is perhaps an explanation of why rioting and destruction of private property during the 2020 riots was seen as a possible remedy to various modes of structural injustice. After all, if the capitalistic, patriarchal, racist system is the root cause of oppression (including the family³²), then the only remedy is to advocate for an overthrow of the system. So while the Church should speak out against issues like institutional racism, it must also speak out against a burning radicalism that seeks to uproot and destroy.

The point here is that we should reject any notion such as that offered by the Marxist perspective that seeks to affect change *from the outside in*. The very notion of inalienable rights—that is, of being made in God’s image—coupled in particular with the notion that the power of the State cannot be used to coerce people into religious obedience speaks to this premise. And it is only further affirmed by history: we only have to look at the atrocities of Stalinism and the loss of millions of lives caused thereby to see the dangers of solutions that are only structural and which give too much power to the State. The problem with Marxism is not that it is radical; rather, the problem is that *it is not radical enough and does not deal with the true problem of evil which finds its home in the human heart* (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:20-21). As discussed earlier, a Biblical model of reform affirms both the protection of inalienable rights (including property) as well as the important role of the Church in addressing spiritual matters. Marxism, in contrast, rejects the spiritual all together, and thus is forced to attempt to remedy injustice and inequality through structural means alone. The concern is not the emphasis on structuralism, but rather that because Marxism is secular, it focuses on structuralism at the expense of anything else. Thus, secularism and structuralism are twin evils which the Church must avoid—pitfalls that can lead it away from preaching the Gospel, affirming the *imago dei* of humans, which includes protection of life, liberty and property, and supporting the integrated participation of churches, families, non-profits and local communities, first and foremost, as a model for change. More discussion of this model will be provided in the final section below.

³⁰ Scott Coley, “A Man and His Inheritance (When Clarifications Fail),” *Faith, Philosophy and Politics: Christianity, Ethics, & Social Systems*, October 18, 2020. <https://faithphilosophyandpolitics.org/2020/10/18/when-clarifications-fail/>

³¹ David T. McLellan “Marxism,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism>.

³² James Jeffrey, “Perhaps Black Lives Matters Was Right about the Nuclear Family,” *The Critic*, December 9, 2020. <https://thecritic.co.uk/perhaps-black-lives-matter-was-right-about-the-nuclear-family/>.

Avoiding Pitfalls of Cultural Engagement

Social Action Only vs. Apathetic Pietism

Thus far, we have seen some pitfalls in how Christians approach the relationship between Church and State, and some ideological extremes to be avoided; now we need to review how Christians navigate various pitfalls in their approach to cultural engagement. The first pitfall to avoid in this category is avoiding the extremes of either emphasizing only pietism or social action. On more than one occasion, Christian movements have suffered from over-emphasizing social action at the expense of Christ-centered intra-personal change and growth and vice versa. Note above the comment about social justice—the call to care for the poor. This indeed a Biblical mandate given to the Church, but it is still secondary to the Great Commission. The most obvious example of where this order was subverted in America pertains to the Progressive movement, which was an outgrowth of the Social Gospel movement.³³ This movement was influenced by the Second Great Awakening's call for social reform, most notably with regards to slavery.³⁴ The greater emphasis on changing the social context tied in nicely with new scientific methods for doing so, including data mapping of neighborhoods and social surveys.³⁵ The urge for reform was also a response to the “Gilded Age” which was characterized by rapid urbanization, the collection of wealth into a handful of corporations, and a sense that the political parties were themselves more interested in power and patronage than they were in offering genuine solutions to problems.³⁶

A continuation of this theme can be found in the 1960's and 70's, where more liberal Protestant denominations sought to expound upon Bonhoeffer's “religionless Christianity”. Bonhoeffer articulated this idea while in prison for a failed assassination attempt on Hitler. He argued that so often, Christianity mired itself in church “hierarchies, forms, jargon, wealth, and power” and therefore lost its efficacy in society.³⁷ Many American church leaders attempted to apply this idea to their own context, which included confronting a white American society often ambivalent, or worse, opposed to the Civil Rights movement.³⁸ Thus, many pastors in Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Anglican churches urged their congregants to leave the church and focus instead on doing good and caring for the poor. This impetus often found itself sympathetically aligned with Marxists who were more focused on problems of structural injustice.³⁹ More to the point, this approach de-emphasized the saving power of Jesus Christ and the need for personal salvation and sanctification.

The other extreme is an over-emphasis on personal spiritual growth without any emphasis on social action or reform. Believing and living in accordance with a personal, intimate relationship with Christ is of course a key aspect of the Christian life. In turn, there should be an easy connection between this type of personal intimate experience with Christ and personal, intimate connections

³³ Bradley W. Bateman, “The Social Gospel and the Progressive Era,” *Diving America: Religion in American History*, February 11, 2021, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/socgospel.htm>

³⁴ Matthew Glass, “Social Gospel,” in *Encyclopedia of American Religious History*, ed. Edward L. Queen, II, et al., 3rd ed., vol. 1, (Boston: Marie A. Cantlon, Proseworks, 2009), 933-934.

³⁵ Bateman, “The Social Gospel.”

³⁶ Frances Lee, “Patronage, Logrolls, and “Polarization”: Congressional Parties of the Gilded Age, 1876–1896,” *Studies in American Political Development* 30, no. 2 (2016): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X16000079>.

³⁷ Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: the Faith That Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 350.

³⁸ Curtis J. Evans, “White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 245, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40211995>

³⁹ Ryrie, *Protestants*, 362.

with other believers, the very essence of Biblical-covenantal behavior and relationships. This would also include a church actively engaged in social justice. But there could certainly be pitfalls to an over-emphasis on piety. Hyper-pietism, for instance, could include an apathy for those who suffer accompanied by an inward-looking emphasis on one's one spiritual state and growth.⁴⁰ Part of the history of fundamentalism has at times been the tendency to be separate from society, with an unwillingness to engage the culture, but instead to withdraw from it.⁴¹ Fundamentalists such as Billy Sunday, for instance, were known to have scoffed at liberals who focused on social issues at the expense of eternal ones.⁴² In contrast, true spirituality, true faith, starts with a deeply personal, inward relationship with Jesus Christ but moves outward to a care and concern for one's neighbors, community, and the world at large.

A related problem with either of these extremes is that both ironically feed an increased role of the State, often at the expense of the Church and other "spheres" of society. While the Social Gospel movement did not disavow church involvement, it de-emphasized the unique Biblical calling of the Church, which must always include preaching the Gospel. In turn, the Progressive Era emphasized that the remedy to social problems was best addressed via administrative efficiency and a stronger centralized executive.⁴³ Solutions emphasizing efficiency and scientific rigor should not in and of themselves be criticized, for certainly we would want well-informed statesmanship and statecraft at all levels of government. However, in its worse variants, this emphasis on expertise has favored a greater centralization of decision-making at the expense of local, grass-roots action, specifically the action of churches intent, first and foremost, on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

This over-centralization is a side-effect of a Church which fails to preach the Gospel: wherein the power of God is exchanged for rules, regulations, hierarchy, programs, and greater centralization, including an increase in the role of the State. In turn, an over-emphasis on State centralization leads to a de-emphasis of Church involvement. If society ignores the deeply personal and spiritual nature of social problems, brought about by sin, churches in turn will devalue communicating the Gospel, and the State will likely be tasked with increasing involvement in society. Further, the sinfulness of human beings would encourage government leaders to call for greater state involvement as a means of gaining more power: the emphasis on "expertise" has made us forget that too much power in the hands of any human being--expert or not--has potential for corruption due to sin. The label of *expert* elides the problem of sinful human hearts and the use of power.

Self-Sufficiency and "False" Conservatism

A close relation to the problem of apathetic pietism is the idea that success in life is earned *solely* through hard work, individual responsibility, and human ingenuity. Granted, we are indeed called to self-government, hard work, and personal responsibility—this is a foundational derivative of being made in God's image. Any political theory which focuses solely on victimhood and ignores any sense of personal responsibility will therefore be flawed. But there is another pitfall to avoid,

⁴⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster, 1981) 31–32.

⁴¹ Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, 41.

⁴² Preston Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 40.

⁴³ "Progressivism," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir, vol. 3, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference, 2010): 1103, 1105

⁴⁴ "Progressivism," 1105.

and it is a petulant, self-serving pride, often fueled by some sense of wealth and success in life, that one has earned personal success without any divine intervention. To the extent to which this idea is wrapped in Christian ideals is the extent to which it represents a counterfeit Gospel wherein humans can earn God's favor through good works and where wealth is always seen as an evidence of God's blessing, and poverty and suffering are due to personal sin, mistakes, and laziness. This view has many variants throughout history and Scripture, from the counsel of Job's friends, to the white-washed righteousness of the Pharisees⁴⁵, to the legalism of modern society, as well as the prosperity gospel which has fueled the empires of so many televangelists.⁴⁶

While Scripture certainly tells us of our personal responsibility to make good choices in life, it also speaks of God's initiating and sustaining sovereign grace which empowers us to choose life, grow and prosper (Romans 11:34-36, Galatians 6:3, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 2:13). Without any mooring in the Gospel of grace, this works-based approach to earning God's favor can lead to an indifference to the poor and to structural injustice. It can also lead to a political conservatism—a “false” conservatism, in fact—which is indifferent to the dangers of materialism, crony capitalism, or selfish individualism. This thought is offered particularly with respect to false equivocations between big government and big business. It can be easy to see the former as good and the latter as evidence of the success a business gains by working hard via the free market. But we do well to remember Adam Smith's—not Karl Marx's—warnings about business leaders:

People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick, or in some contrivance to raise prices.⁴⁷

Smith was no stranger to the greed associated with business interests and was quick to warn of the crony capitalism of his day—mercantilism—which benefited the few at the expense of the many. That he would in turn propose that the State has some role in preventing mercantilism should not be surprising, nor should it be seen as some emanation of “big government.”⁴⁸

Finally, one facet of “true” conservatism versus “false” conservatism is the doctrine of original sin; true conservatism favors limited government because it is predicated on the Biblical truth that each person has the heart of a tyrant that must be restrained by the biblical law of liberty (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:21-23). This argument, along with supporting Scripture, has already been made, but here it is made with a gentle reminder of how political arguments—even from conservatives—are often accompanied with pride and hubris, when true Christianity should entail humility, thoughtfulness, and above all, self-awareness.

This ever-present and quite human tendency toward pride and hubris, moreover, can contribute to a sense of Christian legalism that espouses a moral superiority of one individual or people group at the expense of others, as if mortals could earn the favor of God through good behavior. This notion, though doubtless an implicit tendency in the human soul, makes a mockery of

⁴⁵ D. Louise Mebane and Ridley, Charles R., “The Role-Sending of Perfectionism: Overcoming Counterfeit Spirituality,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 16, no. 4 (December 1988): 337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718801600404>.

⁴⁶ Dan Lioy, “The Heart of the Prosperity Gospel: Self or Savior,” *The Journal of South African Theological Seminary*, 4, no. 9 (January 2007): 43.

⁴⁷ Paul Sagar, “Adam Smith and the Conspiracy of the Merchants,” *Global Intellectual History*, (October 2, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2018.1530066>.

⁴⁸ Kurz, Heinz D. “Adam Smith on Markets, Competition and Violations of Natural Liberty.” *Cambridge journal of economics*. 40, no. 2 (2016): 615–638.

the salvific work of Jesus Christ—a sacrifice needed precisely because no human was righteous apart from this divine intervention (Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Romans 3:10-12). But it is reasonable to assume that subversion of that gospel truth can in turn lead to a sense of moral superiority, which in turn can lead to an inference that one’s culture is superior to another culture group, which in turn can lead to an affirmation of practices like racism and segregation. This conflated sense of moral perfectionism can be fueled by an unholy alliance of self-deception and hypocrisy.⁴⁹ After all, as Frederick Douglass recalled from his time as a slave, “For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.”⁵⁰ These slaveholders were the ones more apt to be more cruel, and more apt to punish for perceived offense and infringements, even proactively so. In short, self-sufficiency—the notion that we can earn God’s favor on our own without a constant and abiding divine intervention, is an abomination to the Gospel and is fueled by the same pride that is comfortable with legalism and racism.

Institutionalism, Credentialism and Elitism

A final pitfall which the Church should avoid is the danger of succumbing to institutionalism, credentialism, and elitism. Credentialism describes a context where educational degrees and related credentials are viewed as an exclusive gateway for accessing jobs and professional roles.⁵¹ This relates to concepts discussed above where government experts are viewed as having the most value and greatest role in solving society’s problems. In turn, State institutions, as well as educational and professional elites, are lifted up at the expense of a more grassroots approach to addressing social and cultural problems. In contrast, while a biblical-covenantal model certainly sees a role for education and experts, it also emphasizes noncentralization, community action, and sincere human engagement to address societal challenges.⁵² This is in keeping with an attempt to capture the very informal, Spirit-driven, but very impactful actions of the early Church, which had no State support nor professional certifications or educational degrees to support its efforts.

It also ties in with the idea of Christian realism, as articulated by, and as can be seen in, the Jesus movement of the 60’s and 70’s where people sought to live out the Gospel in real and intimate ways.⁵³ This perspective can and should work hand in hand with the institutions of government at various levels and should represent a cultural flourishing, where human interaction is multi-faceted, in keeping with a Biblical-covenantal approach. In a society where meeting social needs is reduced solely to the work of credentialed experts and decision-makers, we will see a stagnation of human expression and interaction, an over-growth of the State, and a sterile approach to the depth of human suffering. Christ called as his disciples fishermen, tax collectors, and others, all of whom had

⁵¹ David K. Brown, “The Social Sources of Educational Credentialism: Status Cultures, Labor Markets, and Organizations,” *Sociology of Education*, 2001, 20.

⁵² Kahlib Fischer, “Biblical Principles of Government and Criminal Justice,” *Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy* 1, no. 2 (July 2020): 7. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol1/iss1/3>.

⁵³ Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, 97-98.

questionable *bona fides* from a professional credentialing standpoint, and yet their faithfulness to preach out and certainly, live out the Gospel, upended the world (Acts 17:6).

Further, revivals and growth throughout Church history have been accompanied by these more informal arrangements of preaching, teaching and mutual encouragement. The Methodist revival in England, for example, included an emphasis on numerous small group meetings where Christians would meet to encourage and care for one another, in classes and bands of varying degrees of voluntary but fairly intense intimacy about matters of the heart.⁵⁴ A society and church movement that over emphasizes credentialism and expertise will inevitably lose out on a ground swell of people who see themselves as expositors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their neighbors and indeed to the world itself.⁵⁵

Gospel-infused Change from the Intrapersonal to the Structural: Radical Transformation of the Heart and Soul

This paper first introduced key principles guiding the role of Church and State in society. In light of the subsequent discussion of pitfalls to be avoided, it would be helpful to now summarize how those Biblical principles can provide guidance in avoiding those pitfalls: if the above concepts are extremes to be avoided, what then is the straight and narrow path for Gospel-centered societal reform?

First and foremost, Scripture indicates that change begins in the heart of man (II Corinthians 4:6). Nearly every instance of Christ's comments about what it means to be in the New Kingdom speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit to teach in word and truth (John 4:23-24). Further, he consistently critiqued the Pharisees' overemphasis on rules and regulations rather than the heart of man (Mark 23:27-28). Mark 7:20-22 is an explicit reference to the true root cause of evil and injustice in society, which is a sinful disposition full of hatred, malice and self-centeredness, in contrast to the Pharisees concerns about extra-biblical ceremonial cleanliness. The Epistles continue this trend of focusing primarily on man's relationship with God in the need for the intermediary Jesus Christ and for the power of the Holy Spirit to eliminate sin and lead us to repentance skin growth. In short, the Christian who understands the need for heart change will find the proper balance between pietism and calls for social reform to fix individual problems.

This is not to say that the Bible disavows the need for structural reform. The epistle of James, for instance, warns about rich people in the midst of the believers who use the legal process to exploit the poor (James 2:6-7; 5:1-6). This warning actually echoes themes from the Old Testament where the prophets warn the people how the rich and powerful use the legal political structure to oppress the poor and vulnerable (Isaiah 3:14-15; 10:1-2; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 2:6-7). Also consider the provisions for forgiving debts and restoring land via the Year of Jubilee⁵⁶, protecting indentured servants⁵⁷ and for a judicial System that is impartial and does not favor the rich over the poor (Deuteronomy 1:16-17). The point in providing these few examples is not to suggest that society should be modeled after the manner of the Hebrew Commonwealth. But Christ promised to fulfill every jot and tittle of the law (Matthew 5:18) and Jeremiah prophesied that the law would be written

⁵⁴ Winfield Blevins, *Marks of a Movement: What the Church Can Learn from the Wesleyan Revival*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2019), 136-148.

⁵⁵ Blevins, *Marks of a Movement*, 159.

⁵⁶ Calum Carmichael, "The Sabbatical/Jubilee Cycle and the Seven-Year Famine in Egypt," *Biblica* 80, no. 2 (1999): 224-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42614187>.

⁵⁷ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* 132.

in our hearts (31:33). Therefore, these examples certainly suggest the possibility that we should consider structural, political implications of caring for the poor as we are able, while at the same time acknowledging that Christ did not seek to establish a political kingdom (John 18:36). In short, we are asked to balance the importance of addressing structural injustice while at the same time acknowledging that true change is first and foremost spiritual and must come from the Gospel. We therefore put no hope in any so-called reforms which are only structural and which ignore the spiritual, which is what Marxism and so many other perspectives do. This is also why we reject any heady belief in elitism, credentialism, or centralization, since any human process or institution, no matter how well-staffed with the learned and educated, will be undone by each person's inherent sinfulness. But finally, we also must reject the notion that preaching the Gospel is sufficient, for those changed by the love of God demonstrate that change by loving others, which includes fighting structural injustice rather than offering empty words of care and concern to the needy and the oppressed (James 2:16).

Avoiding these pitfalls requires a deeply intrapersonal use of a biblical-covenantal perspective, which would in turn suggest a matrix of sorts for determining the proper role of the State and Church. First, as noted above, we would acknowledge that for lasting and effective change to occur, change should be seen at the heart level first and foremost, as well as in the realm of the interpersonal. But it also must include broader, structural level changes. Secondly, any needed reforms might require actions from both Church and State. These two sets of bifurcations would in turn overlap and complement one another. Generally, the State would focus on *de jure* injustice and the Church and other spheres of society would deal with *de facto* inequalities as well as the spiritual and personal facets of societal problems. This requires robust involvement from the Church and an understanding that children of God should be actively involved in their communities to serve and love their neighbors in real and practical ways. It requires that the Body of Christ further understand that political participation is an important process not just for protecting individual rights, but for speaking out against all manner of tyranny, whether it manifest in atrocities like abortion, crony capitalism, or structural racism. None of these should be seen as mutually exclusive positions to defend.

When the Church boldly proclaims the Gospel, attention to our relationship with God through Christ is emphasized just as much as the mandate to care for the weak and oppressed. Learning to love one another and serve in our communities is an inherently Biblical, covenantal notion, one that emphasizes noncentralization and the sharing of power from the grassroots level. This love rejects racism, parochialism, and the sterile detachedness of bureaucratic expertise, while also welcoming the participation of educators and subject matter experts dedicated to solving policy problems. It also rejects the notion that the Church's emphasis is solely focused on pietism or indulgent of materialism and false conservatism.

Finally, this perspective requires an awareness of how much more active the Church must be in engaging social issues. For instance, it is one thing to say that the State is overinvested in areas like social welfare as the "sin-crime" distinction seems to indicate; it is another thing altogether for churches to lean in on questions of what it means to be systematically engaged with one's community, including non-profits, businesses, and other churches, to care for the poor. This includes a commitment of church members to be actively involved in caring for the poor, to giving financially to the church so that churches may do so, and for church leaders to recognize that a significant portion of the church budget must be devoted to such issues. It requires church members to know the poor in their churches well enough to understand the full context of the problem—from spiritual to economic. The very notion of noncentralization undermines a top-down emphasis on

laws, policies, and systems. It forces the various spheres of society to simultaneously maintain their autonomy and empowerment while selflessly working together to address issues.

Conclusion

Christ warned us that “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it,” (Matthew 7:14; NIV). Obedience to God requires an awareness of the nuance of avoiding both legalism and licentiousness, of focusing just on inner piety or just on social, structural justice. To avoid those extremes, this paper sought to provide a biblical matrix for addressing both the structural and the personal as well as avoiding the intellectual and political extremes discussed in this paper when considering their social and political roles. Future work will require an application on specific policy issues.

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