

Political theology in our 'Secular' age: A Christo-telic/Christo-centric approach — A Discussion Paper for Church & Nation, January Meeting

How are we to speak and act politically in a secular democracy *as Christians*?

How should we understand this task as an *institutional voice* — where we, as the denomination's Church and Nation Committee, or via various state committees and moderators inform the public voice of the Presbyterian church?

How do we provide a political theology that is robust enough to inform and equip ministers who also speak institutionally, or the priesthood of believers as they engage in the democratic process as voters and advocates? A theology that is robust enough to inform our participation in cooperative campaigns on issues, but that also allows for Christian participation within the mechanisms of the state (in different branches of government, including serving as elected representatives in a representative democracy? How should we understand the *secular* landscape and a legitimate *sectarian* contribution to a secular public square or commons?

An article in *Australian Presbyterian*, in 2017, suggested an approach to engaging in the 'secular' commons (particularly the parliamentary process) built on wisdom and natural law:

"I can understand Christians in Australia being hesitant to [talk about the Bible in parliament] today because you're probably likely to get laughed down, and it might not be seen as a legitimate source for political ideas. So, in a way, it's a strategic rhetorical question. I think the category of natural law – where we argue from common sense and a received wisdom that is accessible to everyone – is a good way of putting your point of view." — 'Political Christians,' Australian Presbyterian, Autumn 2017

To what extent will this approach — built on natural law and common sense — produce a particularly *Christian* political engagement? One that is distinctly different from the politics of the local synagogue or mosque?

If we are not going to be the people who see the Gospel in political terms, that it has implications for how people live together in this world, and claims about what a good life in this world under the Lordship of Jesus looks like, then who will? And what does our nation — or our neighbours — lose if this voice is absent?

To what extent would this methodology reinforce the secular assumptions that underpin the idea that religious views are private matters that have no place in the *public* life of our nation or its citizens?¹

How much should our politics be shaped by *creation*, and how much does God's particular action in *redemptive history* not just centred on the Lord Jesus, but fulfilled in him, inform a *particularly Christian* approach to politics — one that works in imperial Rome, secular Australia, or communist China?

In this paper I am arguing on the basis that all *good* or *ethical* political speech is speech oriented towards what is most loving to one's neighbours in the polis; that, to use modern parlance, *political or public speech (especially public Christianity) should be oriented towards the flourishing of our neighbours and society*, and that we should expect all political contributions in a democracy to be seeking such an end and so participate in our democratic process in *good faith* on the assumption that a virtuous

¹ See Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* for an analysis of different definitions of 'secular' and how we, in the west, have arrived at a position where 'secular' does not mean 'no established religion shaping the public square' but instead 'no religious views are welcome in the public square'.

citizen will participate on this basis (that is to say this gives us permission to act according to our convictions about the good life, and to seek to be persuasive, rather than to seek common ground in 'natural law').

I suggest a Christian understanding of the good or flourishing human life (shared and individual) comes from an understanding of what 'fruitfulness' (cf Genesis 1:28, or the 'cultural mandate') is, and that we should understand 'fruitfulness' or 'flourishing' according to our *telos* — the purpose or 'end' of the human life; which according to our Reformed tradition is, chiefly, that a person 'glorify God and enjoy him forever.'² I will suggest that the ability to meet this *end* or *telos* (that is born from both a theological *anthropology* and an *eschatology*) one must recognise that Jesus is the person who chiefly achieves this end, that Jesus is the true human and true glorifier of God (both of which are caught up in the claim that he is the true image bearer, eg Colossians 1:15), and indeed it is only achieved in and through him, such that this *Christotelic view* (to borrow a phrase from Old Testament scholar Doug Green) should underpin our political theology (and as such our political action).³

I will suggest this means that our political speech and action must explicitly articulate the Gospel of Jesus, and our political positions on issues must reflect and proclaim Gospel truths, as an invitation for our neighbours to truly flourish. Further, I will suggest that just as the Gospel of the Lord Jesus is itself a radical, subversive, counter-politics to the politics of the world, we should be seeking to adopt a politics that subverts the idolatrous powers of modern 'Babylon.' Applying the word 'Gospel' to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus was, in itself, a subversive political act in the first century when the word was used as a technical term for messages heralded by ambassadors of Caesar about the ruler's victory (or to announce a new emperor).

The Gospel is also political in that as it proclaims that Jesus is king, its effect is to create a *kingdom* — a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9), whose citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), who act as 'new-creation' ambassadors of the king (2 Corinthians 5), by carrying the life and death of Jesus in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4) so that God makes his appeal for reconciliation with himself through us (2 Corinthians 5), as he continues to bring about the reconciliation of all things in Jesus (Colossians 1:20). Our political speech, especially when it comes from the 'institution' of the church as an institutional voice should reflect the embodied 'ethical' or 'political' life of our institution (our 'logos' should be consistent with our 'ethos'); and the church should be an alternative *kingdom* or *polis* to the world we live in as 'exiles' and a 'kingdom of priests' (1 Peter 2).

This paper argues that the Gospel is *the heart of our political agenda*; that claims about the Lordship of Jesus extend to every inch of life in his world, but that such claims must be *tied to* (explicitly) and *emerge from* the proclamation of the Gospel; such that a *political strategy* that does not include *Gospel proclamation* is not a properly Christian political strategy, and such that a *political theology* that is not centred on the Lordship of Jesus, and developed through a Biblical theology that sees Jesus coming as the Messiah as the central act not just in Israel's history, but in human history is not a properly Christian political strategy. In seeing Jesus as the centre, or *telos*, of the Bible's (and world's) story and real humanity (or 'human flourishing') we have *good news* to proclaim on *every political issue* that our Australian neighbours grapple with.

² James K.A Smith's 'Cultural Liturgies' series has been particularly helpful in providing a vocabulary and a framework for this, but it sits in both the Reformed tradition, and for example, an Augustinian theological anthropology.

³ See for example Douglas J. Green, 'Psalm 8: What Is Israel's King that You Remember Him,' 2003, 1-11, retrieved online <https://d3h3guilcrzx4v.cloudfront.net/uploads/pdf/articles/psalm8-green.pdf>

This approach is:

- a) Theologically grounded in a Biblical anthropology and a right understanding of God's work in the world, and vision of 'full' or flourishing humanity being found *in* Jesus (in the union with Christ sense of ἐν Χριστῷ).
- b) The *virtuous* (or right and good, thing to do) in that it is our good and loving contribution to the common life of our community and an approach oriented towards our neighbour's flourishing not our own self-interest, political success or power. It will almost certainly not be more *effective* in terms of political outcomes, but it will be more consistent with the wisdom and power of God being displayed in a crucified king.
- c) A better, more interesting and more imaginative approach to politics (in terms of both political speech and political action) that appropriately positions the kingdom of God as an alternative to the patterns of this world in a way that will be the 'aroma of life' to those whom God has called, and will allow the kingdom of God to appropriately take shape in an embodied sense in the 'polis' of the church, but that this is the best and most persuasive way to see the kingdom benefit our neighbours beyond the church and through the 'ruling authorities.'
- d) Strategically *necessary* in a secular democracy; but seeing this as a necessity must be coupled with an understanding that politics within a contested *commons* (or public) must be about either the *balancing of competing truth claims* or the *triumph of one particular ideology as truth*; and the best strategy in either case is the proclamation (in word and deed) of the Gospel — which will properly allow our claims to be understood, or be the basis by which God draws people to himself, and into his kingdom, in order for such a triumph to occur.⁴

Politics begins with anthropology: A Christotelic anthropology produces a Christotelic politics

If politics concerns the organisation of people in communities (or a polis), or the 'operations of the polis', then how we understand the nature of humans (and the communities they build) will (and does) shape our politics. A political theology must be shaped by a theological anthropology.

That we are *image bearers* who *bear the image of God* is both fundamental to any Christian *anthropology*, and, is itself a *political claim* made by the Bible *against* worldly kingdoms. In the ancient near east the king *alone* was said to *bear the image of god* — and, indeed, to be the *divine image incarnate*; statues of 'divine' kings were placed in temples and around kingdoms to mark out the area governed by king and God; a trend that continued into the Roman empire. The claim at the heart of the Biblical account of humanity is that we humans were made to represent the one true God as his living, breathing, *ruling*, regents — and that this is something we do *together*; the image of God is both *corporate* (note, for example, the plurals in Genesis 1, and the 'male and female'), and because it is about people living and ruling *together* it is *political*. It is a counter-political claim against other visions of the 'divine' or 'flourishing' human life; the life lived reflecting the nature of the gods.

⁴ Though I must stress I have *very* little sympathy with the idea of a 'Christian nation' or its possibility before parousia, if that were somebody's political agenda or expectation (ie a post-millennial eschatology), then it is the proclamation of the Gospel that would produce the sort of change required, and not a return to Christian morality achieved through legislation.

Walton (2009) argues both that we should understand the role of image bearing in priestly terms within God's 'cosmic temple' and that we should understand an ancient *ontology* and so, when it comes to people an *anthropology*, as being built around the idea of 'function in a system' — a thing is a thing because it is made for a purpose; and the purpose we humans were made for — our *telos* — is to *bear the image of God*; to represent him. (Benz (2016) suggests that there's an often-missed *relationality* inherent in actively (and vocationally) bearing the image of God, in a stimulating article he suggests:

*"Genesis 1 indicates that God is imaged only when two or more are gathered in the freely self-limiting relational character of God...The implication of this requirement is that an individual neither possesses the divine image as a substance of his or her own being, nor images God in isolation. Rather, the imago Dei is manifest only in relation..."*⁵

The implications the backdrop the claims that *all humans* were made in the image of God brings to that claim are that to bear God's image — as his rulers — together — is a political task, especially in the context of nations and cultures with competing ideas of the good life, the nature of God, and so the nature of power and rule.

While all humans are made with the *telos* of imaging God — that's our purpose and where true 'flourishing' (in the Genesis 1 sense of 'fruitfulness') is found; we, because humanity *rejects God*, are deformed, and instead of bearing the image of the living God, sin means we represent the images of whatever we replace God with. The first two commandments (Exodus 20) about how humanity, especially God's image-bearing 'priestly' nation (Exodus 19) were to live in the world as worshippers, and treat the things of this world, serve as an interesting link between our created purpose and the devastating effects for Israel (and humanity) of rejecting God, not just in terms of exile from his presence, but because as we worship *dead* gods in the place of the living, we share their nature and their fate. We become what we worship (Psalm 115). Our humanity and the image we bear *collectively* and *politically* as we act for our gods and our vision of a good life together, is distorted with deadly results. Our politics — and those we appoint as rulers — are products of corrupted natures, which means, as the WCF (VI.IV) states "we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions." One way that the Bible depicts sin *deforming* us, from the creation story through to the depiction of (political) powers opposed to God in the book of Revelation, is that rather than being glorious and godlike, we become *bestly*. This imagery is particularly applied to the political realm.

We humans are a mixed bag of God's image still in us, leaving us searching for what is *good* and *true*, and our sinful desire to worship and bear the image of anything but God as we search for that good life both *individually* and *corporately*. However, what the WCF also says about *the fall of man* is that the events in the garden — the introduction of sin and death — were "purposed to order it to His own glory;" they anticipated God's plans for the world as ultimately revealed in Christ.

A Christo-telic anthropology is consistent with a Christo-telic reading of the Bible — humanity was always oriented to the *particular telos* of the incarnation of the Son; the revelation of *true humanity*. Where Adam was *made in the image and likeness of God*, Jesus is "*the image of the invisible God*" — a more glorious, immortal, Adam (1 Corinthians 15) whose defeat of death was part of God's creative cosmic agenda to triumph over Satan. If Jesus is the 'lamb slain before the creation of the world' (Rev 13:8), and indeed more glorious than Adam (1 Corinthians 15); if Jesus *is* the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) and we, by the Spirit are becoming new selves

⁵ Brendon Benz, 'The Ethics of the Fall: Restoring the Divine Image through the Pursuit of Biblical Wisdom', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 2016, Vol 46, Issue 4, pp. 191 - 199

‘renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator’ (Colossians 3:10) as God’s ‘holy people’ (Colossians 3:12); if the breath of God that gives life in this world finds its *telos* or end in us receiving the imperishable Spirit of God,⁶ then God’s design for humanity; the *telos* of humanity; ‘true human flourishing’ is found in Jesus, and being united to him by the Spirit, as those who call him Lord (1 Corinthians 12:1-3). Or as Green says “the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ to God’s right hand is the revelation of true Humanity” and then:

“...ultimately humans have value, dignity and honor only as they are in Christ. (Perhaps I should soften this: whatever dignity humans have through being in Adam looks like bestial dishonor when viewed from the perspective of the true humanity of the risen Christ). It is only as we are united to Christ and indwelt by his Spirit that we humans can claim to be bearers of the divine image, crowned with glory and honor.”

We are not inviting people to flourish (and so engaging in politics *ethically* – loving our neighbours as we love ourselves) unless we are inviting them to discover their true humanity in Christ.

It has often been argued that apart from Christ, God’s law still provides the best framework for human flourishing (and that this is part of how ‘common grace’ functions), such that we love our neighbours by upholding his law and promoting it via our political speech and using whatever power is at our disposal; yet Paul claims that Jesus is not just where we discover the *telos* of our humanity — what real fruitfulness looks like, but that he is also the *telos* of God’s law (Romans 10:4). Calvin says of this claim, “whatever the Law teaches, whatever it commands, whatever it promises, always has reference to Christ as its main object, and hence all its parts must be applied to him.”⁸ This suggests that to seek to live by or apply Biblical principals for life without Jesus is not to connect them to their purpose; Paul also says that asking people to live according to God’s law without Jesus; and without the Spirit, will not work because ‘the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God’ and ‘cannot submit to God’s law’ (Romans 8:7).

A question then is to what extent Jesus is the *telos* of natural law also — how God’s two books, as Augustine called nature and Scripture, are to relate to each other and how much this relationship is connected to this *end* or *telos*; namely how much we can expect people to live according to God’s design simply when confronted with arguments from nature, or ‘natural law’.⁹ If ‘what has been made’ reveals ‘the divine nature and character of God’ (Romans 1:20), and if ‘all things were created through him and for him’ and are held together in him (Colossians 1:16-17) then it seems to me we must also see nature, or natural law, properly understood as finding its end in Jesus.

Paul’s account for why God is not recognised through nature — and thus why ‘natural law’ no longer restrains certain behaviours (eg Romans 1:26-32) as he writes Romans (and arguably in human history) is that we have ‘exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1:25). The reason people are blinded to arguments from nature’s capacity to reveal the nature of God, and point humanity to Jesus, is idolatry — the *deforming* worship of created things. When we speak of ‘common grace’ in relation to the state

⁶ Gen 2 in the LXX uses ψυχήν ζωσαν for the ‘breath of life’, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 talks about the ‘natural’ or ‘souled’ body (σῶμα ψυχικόν) in Adam, and the ‘Spirited man,’ Jesus

⁷ Green, 2003, 10

⁸ Brendon Benz, ‘The Ethics of the Fall: Restoring the Divine Image through the Pursuit of Biblical Wisdom’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 2016, Vol 46, Issue 4, pp. 191 - 199

⁹ Natural law makes much more sense in a Catholic anthropology than a Reformed framework, many have sought to jump straight from Aquinas

and its function to ‘bring punishment to the wrongdoer’ as authorities established by God (Romans 13:1-5) we must balance this with the noetic effect of sin and the clear testimony in the Bible (and, for example, the presentation of foreign kings, including Caesar, as divine) that human governments are often inherently idolatrous and deforming; or ‘beastly’; the government regime Paul writes about here is *the same regime that crucified Jesus*, and that John’s apocalypse depicts as beastly servants of Satan.

There is an anthropological gap between those who by the Spirit can call Jesus Lord, and those who are captivated by idols; between those who are in Christ, because of the Spirit, who are no longer ‘natural’ people who are unable to know or please God (1 Corinthians 2:10-15), or as Paul says the “person without the Spirit [lit the ψυχικός δὲ ἄνθρωπος οὐ] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness,” and yet it is precisely these things that come from the Spirit of God that we, the church, are called to proclaim to the world as our witness to our king, and our understanding of the path to true human flourishing, or as the WCF describes the role of the church as ‘the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (WCF XXV.2:

“Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto” — WCF XXV.1-3

Our political theology — and political practice as ‘ambassadors for Christ’ — must be built from this foundational view that God’s design for humanity-in-Christ, and for a flourishing life in his world, is that we be conformed into the image of Jesus as children of God (Romans 8:9-30), and also take into consideration that those without the Spirit cannot know or obey God (Romans 8:5-8), but instead worship and are transformed into the image of deathly idols. If we aren’t going to make this case in our public theology, or political speech, who will? And if we don’t make this case because of a fear of rejection or a lack of political success, then what speech are we preferring in its place? To what extent is our wisdom the ‘wisdom of the world’ or an attempt to wield power, and trust in our own arguments or strategies, rather than being shaped by the weakness of the cross? To what extent is our political speech modeling that we believe that God acts through the ‘foolish’ *political speech* of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1:21-25)?

Resolving a tension: Common Grace, the noetic effect of sin, and ‘beastly empires’

Our Reformed approach to politics, and the government, is built on a tension between:

1. *Common grace* where we see the *state* being divinely appointed ‘for our good,’ where our doctrine of creation, and especially the image of God allow us to expect human systems to produce *order* and limit the effects of sin; and
2. The *noetic effect* of sin — the way sin damages our ability to know true things about God and the world (in order to govern well).

To consider how this tension applies in the political realm, we might be drawn between politics and common grace, and, for example, scholarship and common grace. Stephen Moroney (1999) published an article with a model for determining how much our sinful natures affect scholarship (and in what fields) that developed on models from Abraham Kuyper and Emil Brunner.

Moroney suggests that in Kuyper's model there is a field of knowledge divided between matters of **knowledge** (mathematics, physical science, etc), and matters of **principle** (philosophy, theology, etc), and that in matters of knowledge *common grace* operates to ensure those with and without the Spirit of God are coming to reasonably similar substantial conclusions, where in matters of principle sin operates with a distorting effect.

"In Kuyper's view, Christian thinkers may be characterized as abnormalists in the sense that they believe the world in its present state is abnormal, that is, fallen and in need of renewal. Conversely, non-Christian thinkers may be characterized as normalists in the sense that they believe the world in its present state is normal, that is, not in need of any radical renewal.

*Kuyper believed that regenerate thinkers and unregenerate thinkers were fundamentally different in their outlooks, so that in almost all cases these two groups would disagree with one another in their thinking. Because there are two kinds of people, there are two kinds of thinking. Kuyper declared that 'the fact that there are two kinds of people occasions of necessity the fact of two kinds of human life and consciousness of life, and of two kinds of science... In matters of pure sensory observation and in matters of pure logical reasoning, as opposed to higher matters of principle, Kuyper believed that the noetic effects of sin were restrained by God's common grace.'*¹⁰

Moroney's criticism of Kuyper's model is worth heeding, he suggests the reductionist view that there are simply 'two types' of views doesn't hold up when it comes to differences within Christian thought (and for our purposes, within Presbyterian thought), let alone within the non-Christian category. It is clear, for example, that natural law arguments are more persuasive to some non-Christians than they are for others, and the strength of such arguments varies from issue to issue.

Moroney depicts Brunner's model as a series of concentric circles; with the knowledge of God at the centre, and ethics (politics), humanities, and mathematics and the natural sciences in progressively larger circles; where the noetic effect of sin has the most weight the closer one is to considering *theological questions*. He quotes Brunner saying:

"It makes practically no difference whether a scholar is a Christian or not; but this difference emerges the moment that we are dealing with problems of sociology, or law, which affect man's personal and social life."

Then, pertinent to our question (in terms of establishing a model for approaching politics).

"In Brunner's schema, the study of law, the State, history and other such disciplines lie midway between reason's knowledge of the world and faith's knowledge of God. Hence, in these subjects, Brunner believed there must be an accounting for the noetic effects of sin."

And again, quoting Brunner:

"We do find a different kind of marriage, family life, a different relation to our fellow men, and hence, influenced by that, a different kind of public justice." So, according to Brunner, "it is significant and necessary to distinguish the Christian conceptions of freedom, the good, community, and still more the Christian idea of God from all other conceptions."

¹⁰ Stephen K. Moroney, 'How Sin Affects Scholarship: A New Model,' *Christian Scholar's Review* XXVIII (Spring 1999): 432-451, 434

Moroney's main objections to Brunner's model is that it fails to adequately account for corporate or systemic sin (the way institutions, put together by sinful individuals, reflect the collective sin of those individuals), and that he fails to account for the *ongoing effect* of sin in the life of believers, because we are products of, and participants in these institutions, but also because we are still sinful this side of the return of Jesus (though the indwelling of the Spirit does mean we should expect our thinking to be less affected by sin).

Moroney's own model starts with a similar premise, that "the noetic effects of sin generally are expected to be most evident in the knowledge of God, less evident in the knowledge of human beings, and least evident in the knowledge of impersonal aspects of creation; Moroney's model does not simply operate by considering the 'known object' (ie how much the *noetic effect* is present simply in particular fields of study), but also the 'knowing subject' — where he acknowledges that our ability to reason is not isolated from the spiritual aspects of our lives (so that there is a moral aspect to our ability to know or believe things), from the communities in which we participate,¹¹ and also that we bring different individual experiences, practices, and abilities to any field of knowledge (whether in terms of *created* differences, or differences through the accretive practice of virtue or vice).

Moroney quotes Cornelius Plantinga Jr, who says: "*moral evil is social and structural as well as personal; it comprises a vast historical and cultural matrix that includes traditions, old patterns of relationship and behaviour, atmospheres of expectation, social habits.*"

When applying any of these three models (or any model that acknowledges that the fall affects our knowledge of creator, self, and creation) to political questions it seems that it is worth acknowledging that access to 'common grace' is not quite as straightforward as mounting 'common sense' arguments from 'received wisdom,' because these arguments are likely to fail in certain circumstances; coupling the Biblical anthropology above (and especially the Smith/ Augustinian model of the human as 'worshipper' rather than purely rational creature) with the Romans 1 insight that at the heart of the corruption of sin is the 'exchange of creator for created things,' perhaps a model of the noetic effect that accounts for the failure of 'natural law' arguments is one that sees the noetic effect operating with the strongest pull away from God's design for his world where the deforming, almost *magnetic*, power of idols is present. This might, for example, explain the failure of natural law arguments around the definition of marriage to gain traction in a culture that worships sex and personal freedom and sees these as essential to human flourishing. Paul's solution to the noetic effect of sin — that our fleshly minds cannot 'submit to God's law' (presumably from chapter 1 both his revealed law and what is revealed about him in nature but suppressed), is the Spirit (Romans 8:6-9).

When Paul describes our inability, because of our flesh-governed minds, to submit to God's law, in order to produce righteousness it seems awkward to me that we suggest submission to worldly authorities — also governed by the flesh — will be possible, or will produce righteousness (so that the laws of governments are somehow more effective than God's revealed law in restraining evil). Especially when those governments — as human institutions — are often built to support or propagate a culture's shared idols (as is the case in the nations surrounding Israel in the Old Testament, the Rome of the New Testament, and arguably in all modern governments that are not Christian theocracies (and even in those, eg The Vatican, where the WCF explicitly names the pontiff as the antichrist).

¹¹ Following Alisdair MacIntyre's insights that we are always dependent on certain traditions, not blank slates, and consistent with Peter Berger's observations that knowledge is *socialised* not just *rationalised* through "plausibility structures"; and those structures are not just our 'worldview' but those people who our shape our social world

Perhaps Paul's instructions about the government (Romans 13) expect a degree of common grace, or latent divine image, to still be at work in all people (a possible reading of his logic about 'knowing what he ought to do' in Romans 7), but this comes after his instruction to 'not be conformed to the patterns of this world' (Romans 12:2), and instruction not to repay evil with evil (Romans 12:14-21), which for the early church must surely have been an instruction to heed in response to the persecuting actions of the state itself;¹² the same state which crucified Jesus. Peter urges believers to submit to authorities (1 Peter 2:13-15), he also expects these believers will suffer at the hands of those authorities not for being criminals, but for bearing the name of Christ (1 Peter 4:14-16). Revelation depicts a beast rising up to destroy the faithful witnesses (lampstands, or faithful churches) in 'the public square' of that great city; in a sense an apocalyptic picture of how we should expect all faithful public Christianity to end.

"Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days some from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth." — Revelation 11:7-10

Richard Bauckham is one of many scholars who identifies the beastly empire of Rome behind the apocalyptic language of John's Revelation, which he suggests should be read as an apostolic epistle to real first century churches (which also provides certain limits as to how we might apply the text to our context).

"It is a profound prophetic interpretation of the contemporary religio-political image of the empire, both in Rome's own propaganda and in its subjects' profoundest responses to Roman rule. This religio-political ideology, which John sees as a parody of the Christian claims about Christ, was no mere cover for the hard political realities: it entered deeply into the contemporary dynamics of power as they affected the lives of John's contemporaries. He sees it as a deification of power... The riddle of the number of the beast pointed specifically to Nero as the figure whose history and legend displayed, to those who had wisdom, the nature of the Roman Empire's attempt to rival God. Any contemporary reappropriation of Revelation's images that aims to expose the dynamics of power in the contemporary world in the light of the Gospel would also have to be specific."¹³

If 'beastliness' is the result of the distortion of our image bearing role as regents in God's creation (Green) — an abuse of that God-given power in service of ourselves or idols, or the deification (or idolatry) of power (Bauckham); the sort of distortion that sees Jesus and those faithfully witnessing to him 'crucified' in the public square, then we should expect such *beastly* behaviour to be found around the wielding of political power; and should also have our own use of such power tempered by the revelation of the true king in the crucified Lord Jesus. This should shape both our *manner* or *methods* of political engagement, but also our message; such that we see the Gospel — the proclamation of Jesus as king, and that his Lordship extends over every inch of our lives and creation — as the good political statement we should be making and living out as his ambassadors, and the path to real human flourishing, even as we expect such a message to be rejected by those blinded by idols and not brought to life by the Spirit. The contrast to beastliness is found in the restoration of our role as divine image bearers in Christ; as citizens and ambassadors of his kingdom; as a faithful presence, or witnesses, in the world that crucified its king.

¹² See, for example, Pliny's Letter to Trajan

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax Of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, 451-452

Political speech and action is oriented by an *eschatological vision* (also a *telos*)

The course we set, and our expectations we have for our political activity will not just be shaped by a doctrine of *creation* or a sense of how this plays out in what it means to be human, or to form a community or polis of humans, but will also be shaped by what our expectations are about where humanity is going and how God's kingdom will or won't be realised in this world (in both the spheres of church and state); our *eschatology*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this in depth, but many Christian political theologies and strategies are shaped by *particular* eschatological visions.

Different understandings of the 'millennium' are possible within a confessional framework — and there has been a diversity of views and practice from pre- to a- to post-millennial, each of these positions brings with it political expectations about how effective we will be (and what our goals should be in this world as the church); these are perhaps best expressed in terms of what sense we should expect the kingdom of Jesus to come now; whether it is limited to the church (pre- and to some extent a- millennial), or permeates all structures as the kingdom unfolds in anticipation of Christ's return (post-). Whether the kingdom comes in the church alone, or also through the state, its coming is about a *political* reality, or expressed in institutions (be it church, state, or both) makes praying the Lord's Prayer (your kingdom come) a political act — at stake is how much sense it makes for our parliament to open each day with its words.

Our own confessional eschatological vision does involve a political vision of sorts; or a profound shaping of our ethics, in that we should live as though we await a day of judgment, that this should 'deter *all* men from sin' and console us in adversity, and should cause us to "be always watchful" because "we know not at what hour the Lord will come" (WCF 33)

Image-initive faithful presence and the disruption/subversion of beastly regimes

Rediscovering our the *political* function of image bearing; especially in a world where power is largely used to support, maintain, and extend the *distortion* of the image borne by our neighbours, *particularly* when that power operates around the common idols of our culture, leaves us in a position where we are forced to re-imagine how we participate in politics as we invite our neighbours and rulers to 're-image-ine' themselves and the flourishing human life; in connection with the ultimate *end* of humanity; 'to glorify God and enjoy him forever' in and through Jesus Christ being transformed into his image. To engage in political action is to present or advocate for a particular image of the good human life; such activity is always *essentially* religious in that there is a fundamental relationship between how cultures we *imagine* the good human life and the image we have of God (even if such an image is not a transcendent being, but simply a created thing occupying the place of God). Our political or public speech and action is an opportunity to stoke the imaginations of our neighbours and to invite them to consider what kingdom they are *citizens* of; how their imaginations are forming them into *images*, and what gods they are being formed by.

To bear an image is to be an embodied, physical, representative presence in space and time. To bear the image of Jesus alongside those bearing varying degrees of distorted 'beastly' images; departing from God's design for humanity, and in a 'polis' where power is deified and used to support various idolatry, leaves us as disrupters or subverters of the idolatrous status quo — as was the case with the early, pre-Christendom, church in the Roman empire (and perhaps, ideally, Israel in

exile in Babylon).

Seeing the government as potentially *bestly* does not preclude Christian participation or presence in society or government, it simply re-orientates such participation (and calibrates or tempers our expectations of success). It means submitting to the government as God's agent for wielding the sword might mean submitting to its right to bear the sword against us for not conforming to its patterns of behaviour; for not bending the knee (which is part of what is made in God's image) to Caesar, while paying him our taxes. Our expectation, or measure, of success should be shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus — including his encounters with 'bestly power'; and it is perhaps *cruciformity itself* that should be the 'subversive' metric we use for assessing how well we are avoiding 'conforming to the patterns of this world' (and indeed 'offering ourselves as a living sacrifice' is our act of worship, Romans 12:1).

Faithfulness, or faithful presence, for the churches in Revelation was linked to testimony, including the ultimate 'witness' of martyrdom (a deliberate tautology), to the Lord Jesus. The Gospel will always put us at odds with the wisdom and powers of this world. In 1992 Brian Walsh wrote *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in Dangerous Times*, which seems to me to be a better political handbook for our times than more recent works, in which he suggests that part of the offense of the Gospel is found in the challenge it presents to the worldly status quo (which was certainly Paul's experience as he undermined (pun intended) the silversmiths of Ephesus, disrupting the city, in Acts 19). Walsh takes the Babylonian exile as a paradigm for how we're to live in this world as citizens of heaven, exiles, and a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9-11), and Babylon as a model of the 'bestly' human empire.

*"If our presence in this culture is to be Christian we must recognise with Christian insight the profound abnormality of it all. This means that we cannot allow our experience of exile to define reality for us. We must not allow the Babylonian economic worldview so to captivate our imaginations that its patterns, its views, and its priorities become normal for us."*¹⁴

He says we should look to the example of Israel in telling and re-telling its story (including the Genesis story) against the competing narratives of Babylon to maintain its identity, but also to articulate and imagine a better image of humanity in order to live differently, persuasively, and subversively, in exile:

*"Since we live in a culture that tells a different story—a progress story with homo economicus as the Promethean hero—and since that story so often captivates our imagination, it seems to me that we should never tire of retelling to each other that very same creation story. We must allow its vision of being human to captivate our imaginations and to give us direction and hope in our cultural captivity."*¹⁵

Our imagination-captivating, image-shaping origin story is no longer simply the Genesis creation account, but now includes the culmination of that story, and our humanity, it is the story of Jesus; proclaiming that story as a subversive political act will be offensive, but it is also our most subversive and powerful political, because it is where the status-quo upending, beast-destroying, life-giving, re-creating, power of God is found.

"A Christian worldview, a Christian lifestyle lived in the light of the events of Easter, proclaims that the true lord of history is the crucified and risen one—the one who proclaimed

¹⁴ Brian Walsh, *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in Dangerous Times*, 17

¹⁵ *ibid*

that the kingdom of God is at hand. And that kingdom, that rule, undermines all other pretentious kingdoms and all other cultural experiments that are not rooted in the kingdom of God. This kingdom calls for their total redirection. This is a gospel that is subversive and therefore, for those who benefit from present socio-cultural arrangements, offensive."¹⁶

Conclusion

My contention is that it is the Gospel itself that provides a political theology; that our engagement with the world should be shaped by our anthropology — including an understanding of the effect of sin and the idolatrous replacement of creator with creation at the heart of worldly power — and that our political speech and action should be the cruciform proclamation of the crucified king; that we on one level we should not expect this to be *persuasive*, and indeed should expect a degree of ridicule or persecution, but also that in a truly secular democracy having our beliefs properly understood is our best chance to have them understood, 'represented' or recognised by our laws and lawmakers. Our anthropology — our understanding that all people are essentially *religiously motivated, worshipping, image bearers* means that this approach is actually politically legitimate in a way that transcends different governments and cultures; it is the approach we might expect Paul to adopt in the Roman Empire (as indeed he does in Acts), that the early church adopted in that same context, and that we might expect faithful witnesses and ambassadors for Christ to adopt in both western democracies and other contexts throughout the modern world.

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¹⁶ *ibid*, 14.