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HOPEFUL REALISM

EVANGELICAL NATURAL LAW
AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS



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THE BIBLE AND POLITICS

“IT MUST BE NICE, it must be nice to have Washington on your side.” So goes the lyric sung by the actors portraying Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s phenomenon and hit musical *Hamilton*.¹ Jefferson and Burr are needling Alexander Hamilton for how much he relies on George Washington’s prestige to win an argument. It’s much easier to carry the day if you have an American icon backing you up.

Given how important Scripture is for evangelicals on any contested subject, including politics, it must be nice to have the Bible on your side. The dangers of such a sentiment are that we Christians can rely on the thin reed of proof-texting or we can be tempted to find in Scripture support for what we already want to be true. Abraham Lincoln was reportedly once asked if God was on his side. The story goes that his response was that he hoped that he was on God’s side, because God is always right. There’s something similar to be said about Scripture. We should want to be informed and directed by what God has revealed in his Word; we should be wary of shaping God’s Word to serve our political ends. There are important connections between authoritative biblical teaching and our political witness, but drawing these connections well is as important as it is challenging.

So how should the Bible inform a Christian’s approach to politics? Given two thousand years of disagreement about the uses and misuses

¹Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Washington on Your Side,” *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Atlantic Records, 2015, MP3.

of Scripture as applied to politics, we recognize this is fraught territory. We first describe our positive view of Scripture's place overall and then briefly offer four guidelines for how Scripture relates to politics. Because such matters are so easily misunderstood, before moving to the treatment of our chosen passages we draw some crucial distinctions and try to state clearly what we are *not* trying to do with Scripture.²

SCRIPTURE'S PLACE AND THREE CRITICAL PASSAGES

We start with the conviction that Scripture is the highest authority God has given us to govern our conduct and belief.³ We think of this commitment to a high view of Scripture as a cluster of claims. First, God speaks intelligibly through the Bible such that Christians individually and corporately can draw moral and political conclusions (among other things) from Scripture. Second, where Scripture speaks clearly it is the highest epistemic authority—though we recognize that the Bible does not address every political question nor provide unambiguous answers to every issue. As a result, and third, any approach to politics (or any other subject) that occludes the witness of Scripture, arbitrarily cordons off biblical truths from the public square, or undermines scriptural teaching contradicts Christian convictions. The positive corollary of this claim is that Scripture is the “norming norm,” the standard to judge all other standards. While we recognize the human and cultural influences that went into the inspiration of Scripture (and which impact its interpretation), Scripture itself provides the measure by which the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, measures everything else.

Moving from Scripture's place generally to its application to the political realm, we rely on four ideas to inform our understanding of Scripture's role for political thinking.

²The subject of how to appropriately read and apply Scripture is in itself a project worthy of a book or several books. We proceed nevertheless because we think some of our underlying methodology will reveal itself through our applying it, and because of human finitude.

³See the Belgic Confession, Articles 5 and 7, and the Lausanne Covenant, Article 2.

1. First, drawing from the Protestant Reformers and their antecedents, who themselves drew from Scripture, all Christians are capable and indeed encouraged to learn the Scriptures for themselves. (A corollary of the perspicuity and authority of Scripture is the use of Scripture to interpret itself, including using the New Testament to interpret the Old.⁴)
2. Second, the teachings of the church fathers and mothers, and tradition generally, complement our understanding of the Scriptures as an important and invaluable supplement, even as they are not ultimately authoritative.⁵
3. Third, we commend Augustine's teaching about how to approach and prioritize grappling with Scripture: with humility; with the clearer teachings prioritized first and the obscure passages later; with a hermeneutic of love guiding the interpreter; and also with a recognition that pagan wisdom can be put to Christian use to understand things.⁶
4. Fourth and finally, we acknowledge that Scripture does not address every topic, and this is particularly true about politics. While we think that the legitimacy of taxes follows from Scripture's teaching,

⁴This leads us to a Christocentric reading of the Old Testament, following Luke 24:27, where the risen Christ teaches the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

⁵We admire John Calvin's treatment of this balance in his introductory letter to King Francis I of France, in which he responds to the charge that he and his followers oppose the church fathers:

Still, in studying their writings, we have endeavored to remember (1 Cor. 3:21-23; see also Augustine Ep. 28), that all things are ours, to serve, not lord it over us, but that we are Christ's only, and must obey him in all things without exception. He who does not draw this distinction will not have any fixed principles in religion; for these holy men were ignorant of many things, are often opposed to each other, and are sometimes at variance with themselves.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), Prefatory Letter, 10.

⁶Augustine describes a hermeneutic of love thus: "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them." Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27. See also p. 80. Likewise, Augustine describes the value of pagan learning with the analogy of Israelites plundering Egyptians' gold when embarking on the Exodus—it should be "claimed for our own use" (64-67). See also Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. O. Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 121-23.

we don't think Scripture teaches what the tax rate should be, nor whether a graduated income tax is an efficient or fair means of raising revenue.

Given what we've written above it's clear we disagree with those who claim that the Bible either does not speak to our political realities or that Christians cannot draw any conclusions from Scripture about human goods. But we also disagree with the position that the Bible, or the institutional church, offers a comprehensive blueprint or an instruction manual for grounding and exercising political authority. That sort of approach lends itself to a mild or strong version of church establishment or even theocracy, which we judge unsupported by Scripture and historically disastrous on both theological and political criteria.

We also distinguish between scriptural teaching for the people of God as the church proper, and what Scripture teaches about *creational* goods that can be pursued, promoted, and protected in the public square for all people. While we think natural law is a part of the latter category, teasing these matters out is no simple affair, which helps explain why Christians of goodwill have disagreed so often in years past and will no doubt continue to do so. For example, you can clearly derive from Scripture the norm against stealing while simultaneously believing that (1) you can know stealing is wrong *without* deriving that from Scripture, and (2) the norm applies to Christians and non-Christians alike. Contrast stealing with the moral duty to honor the Sabbath by attending worship. You can make a strong case for this norm from Scripture, but unlike stealing, it is a much harder case to make that worshipful Sabbath-observance is discernible via unaided reason. Thus, non-Christians should not be held accountable, morally or legally, for failing to keep the Sabbath by attending worship. Throughout this book we will refer to Christian-specific goods and norms as “redemptive” and use “creational” to refer to common human goods and norms (like property or education).⁷ There is much more to be said

⁷Significantly, this language could confuse some, particularly those in the Reformed or neo-Kuyperian parts of evangelicalism, as here the restoration of creational goods (what we're calling creational) is sometimes called *redemptive*. While the restoration of creation is certainly part of

about these distinctions, and it is worth noting that we take a minimalist approach—focusing on a limited set of passages—in order to draw essentials to the foreground rather than answer every question. Hopefully these introductory remarks clear enough ground for us to proceed for now with the following passages in Genesis, Matthew, and Romans.

SCRIPTURAL GROUNDS

Scripture is replete with examples that inform our thinking about the importance of both redemptive and creational goods. This section offers a reading of three key passages to ground an understanding of politics and human flourishing: Genesis 1–4, Matthew 22:15–22, and Romans 13:1–7. There are of course other important passages for Scripture, but these passages address foundational questions at the heart of an evangelical natural law rooted in Scripture. In Genesis, what do the creation accounts tell us about how God authored our human nature and how the Fall has changed things? In Matthew 22, what does a famous confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees tell us about the claims of Caesar and the claims of God? And in Romans 13, how does this crucial political passage from the apostle Paul build on the insights of Genesis and Matthew to situate our earthly and heavenly citizenships today in pluralistic and democratic societies?

Genesis 1–4: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . .*” We sometimes move too quickly past the first four words of the first verse to get at what God is doing, and by doing so we can miss a prior declaration about the simple fact that “In the beginning God . . .” The beginning of Christian thinking about any discourse or subject—including politics—begins with God, and who God is, and then moves to what God is doing. In these opening four words we learn something about God’s standing. Before all things, before history begins, God *is*. He is foundational. It should not surprise us that later he reveals himself to Moses as “I am.”

God’s redemptive work, our use of the term *redemptive* here focuses on the particular norms that are unique to a saving covenantal relationship with God.

When the God-Who-Is *acts*, we quickly see why professors and scholars have an affinity for the opening chapters of Genesis and all the defining and categorizing that takes place there. The Hebrew Scriptures begin with a series of definitions and categorizations, separations and distinctions. This light is distinct from that light, this body of water from that, this land will go thus far and no farther, these plants bear this seed, and these animals are of this but not that type. This first account of creation is crowned with the creation of human beings made in God's image, male and female; they are tasked with oversight and stewardship of God's creation and told to be fruitful and multiply. This account closes with God's benediction, God's blessing of all of this as "very good."⁸ It is telling, on this account, that both male and female together reflect or somehow are God's image, and that their first task is to "be fruitful" and in so doing creatively partner with God to bring into being other creatures made in God's image. It is also significant that God simultaneously creates a *particular* type of being who bears God's image and declares that the *entirety* of the creation is very good. The special status of the human is not, at least at this point, in tension with the goodness of the creation.

The second creation account beginning in Genesis 2 describes a different "first task" given to Adam.⁹ Though much has rightly been made of the priestly role assigned to Adam through his taking care of the garden, here we focus on Adam's second task. In this creation account God charges Adam to name the animals. In chapter one the male and the female, like other creatures, are to be fruitful and multiply. In chapter two we see Adam following God's practice of categorization and labeling from Genesis 1. God brings before Adam the natural realities that God has created and tasks Adam with naming those realities through the power of the spoken word.

⁸And thus we should anticipate the redemption of more than just individuals made in God's image, but the cosmos (Romans 8:22).

⁹For the interpretation of this task in terms of Adam's (and Eve's) priestly role, see John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 104-15. We don't claim Walton would agree with how we understand God's negative pronouncement on Adam's aloneness.

Significantly, at creation, God assigns humans the task of filling the earth, subduing it, and ruling over it—what many have referred to as the creation mandate or the cultural mandate. God charges humans with the task of imitating God in developing and ordering creation—building culture. The construction of culture involves using human reason, creativity, and agency to unlock the latent potentialities of the created order. The story of redemption begins with a garden and culminates with a garden-city—the new Jerusalem—signaling the *development* rather than the repristinization of creation.¹⁰ Faithful humanity will rightly rule—“exercising dominion”—over creation.

What follows is rather surprising. Before the verses that describe the Fall, God declares that something is “not good.” The first problem in Scripture is not Adam and Eve’s disobedience but Adam’s aloneness. It is “not good for man to be alone.” God, the author of human nature, tells us that human beings are meant to live in community. Humanity is created male and female in God’s image in Genesis 1, and Adam’s aloneness (though not yet alienation) is a problem in Genesis 2. We are made to live in community. God’s immediate response to the problem of chapter two is the creation of the woman, who acts not only as the man’s helper,¹¹ but with the man comes together to create one flesh. This pairing bears an analogical relation to the Trinity insofar as God’s triune nature cannot be completely captured by the Father, Son, or Spirit alone, and humanity in turn needs more than just the man or just the woman alone.¹²

Chapter three moves us from Adam’s aloneness and its solution to Adam and Eve’s alienation, both from God and from each other. While we cannot look back from this side of the curse to understand exactly how a disordered decision could be made before our natures became

¹⁰See Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹¹The Hebrew for “helper,” *ezer*, should not necessarily be understood here as subordinate, as the same word is used to refer to God helping Israel elsewhere in the OT (1 Samuel 7:12).

¹²We can’t treat this suggestion with any depth here, but the juxtaposition of the one and the many seems at work in the very nature of God and those who bear (or are) his image. How many of our perennial political problems stem from post-Fall contested visions as to the tensions between the good of the individual and the community?

disordered, we surely recognize the blame-shifting excuses that immediately follow, and the shame felt by Adam and Eve in their first awareness of their nakedness. No longer will God walk with them in the cool of the day, and with the declaration of the curse and expulsion from the garden we are given only a hint of what that loss of relationship between God and humans must have been for those who knew untainted fellowship with God. Yet even in the description of difficult childbirth, painful toil, and dust returning to dust, we see the first proclamation of the gospel in the “protoevangelium” of Genesis 3:15. Yes, the serpent will strike the heel of the woman’s offspring, the son of man, but that same son will someday crush the serpent’s head.

If the expulsion underlines the reality of rupturing the “vertical” relationship between God and man, Cain’s murder of Abel in chapter four shockingly drives home the “horizontal” consequences as well.¹³ Abel’s blood cries out from the ground, and Cain’s subsequent conversation with God and founding of the first city tell us something important about creational moral norms.¹⁴ God’s redemptive plan is perhaps also foreshadowed here in that while the first murderer founds the first city, God’s people will someday inhabit not a renewed garden but the new Jerusalem, a city founded on a different sort of blood than that shed by Cain.

At this point the reader may be forgiven for wondering what any of this might have to do with a Christian approach to politics. In Genesis we find foundational truths about the *world* and *human nature* that prove

¹³It is not coincidental that the greatest commandments directly correlate with the bidirectional nature of our alienation. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength (vertical), and love your neighbor as yourself (horizontal).

¹⁴It is interesting that Cain cries out to God that anywhere he goes his life will be in danger, which has been interpreted by several Christian luminaries as indicative of humanity’s moral knowledge of the wrongness of murder. Consider Calvin in his commentary on the book of Genesis:

Cain, however, in this place, not only considers himself as deprived of God’s protection, but also supposes all creatures to be divinely armed to take vengeance of his impious murder. This is the reason why he so greatly fears for his life from any one who may meet him; for as man is a social animal, and all *naturally* desire mutual intercourse, this is certainly to be regarded as a portentous fact, that the meeting with any man was formidable to the murderer.

John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1948), 213. Emphasis added.

foundational for political theory. Human identity and worth are bound up with God and God's purposes. In the beginning, God was, and in God's image he created them, male and female. While all of creation has value, there is something special about human beings. Christians thus have good reason to affirm human dignity. Moreover, God has created human beings to live in community. Nevertheless, because our first parents rebelled against God's good providence for them and we are complicit in continuing that rebellion, we do not live well together. We fight, we bicker, we envy, we kill. By our very God-given nature we are social creatures meant to love and live together—developing culture in society as we fulfill the creation mandate. But by our very sinful nature we sabotage love and community by seeking to dominate our fellow image-bearers (Deuteronomy 30:19). We have distorted our *imago Dei* and fractured the divine relationship with God and horizontal human relationships with each other.

We need each other. We cannot live peaceably with each other. And yet in the protoevangelium we get a first glimpse at God's ultimate plan for reconciling his rebellious children to himself and to each other. Only through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross will the serpent's head be crushed and the curse finally undone.¹⁵ In the meantime, life will be marked by pain, toil, conflict, and death, though mingled with joy, love, music, and laughter. Attempts to overcome the curse entirely by our own efforts will fail, as a later passage in Genesis (Genesis 11:1-9) will illustrate through the quixotic Tower of Babel project. Finally, we draw from the Genesis account the idea that while God's ultimate plan for reconciliation is the cross, creational life in the body does not go on "pause." Rather, politics, law, and culture have a preserving and developing role to play until the eschaton arrives and Christ returns. For better or for worse, the Hebrew Scriptures undeniably speak to the political, and God's covenants seem to perform more than one purpose in not only preparing for the Messiah but also promoting and preserving an earthly and limited but nevertheless valuable political existence. The law cannot

¹⁵See note above regarding Luke 24:27 concerning a Christocentric reading of the Old Testament.

bear the salvific burden that some of God's people mistakenly attributed to it but choosing even an earthly life meant choosing to live by God's law (Deuteronomy 30:19).

We draw from Genesis, then, several insights relevant for Christian thinking about both the political realm and the natural law:

1. God has created human nature and set it apart as something special, made in God's image.
2. The rest of creation is also valuable, and God calls human beings as his image-bearers to preserve and creatively develop it.¹⁶
3. We are persons made to live in community. It is not good for man or woman to live alone.
4. We are fallen sinners and don't live well together.
5. God's ultimate plan to reconcile us to him and to each other is accomplished through the work of Jesus on the cross and fulfilled at his return.
6. In the meantime, as we will see confirmed in the passages to come, earthly politics is a God-ordained means of restraining evil and promoting creational goods.

In our next passage we will see these lessons further developed by the very Son of Man anticipated by the protoevangelium in Genesis.

Matthew 22:15-21: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” In this passage, a group of overly ambitious Pharisees attempt to put Jesus in a tough spot by asking him an explicitly political question. After some passive-aggressive flattery, the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. This was not just a wonky question about good public policy. Israel was under the boot of a harsh Roman foreign occupation, and there was a range of Jewish responses to this—from nationalist zealots who violently resisted the occupation to collaborating tax collectors whose job it was to support their oppressors at the expense of their fellow Jews. We do well to keep in mind that both

¹⁶See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

zealots and tax collectors numbered among Jesus' own disciples. If Jesus answers that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, then he will infuriate and alienate those who strongly resent the Roman presence in Israel. If he denies the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, he crosses not only the Romans but their Jewish collaborators as well. He gives his enemies ammunition to interfere with his ministry, and while Jesus was hardly one to fear confrontation, he did consider the timing and circumstances of when he would cause a ruckus.¹⁷ So not for the first time or the last, a religious leader is put in a tough spot by a political question. He is in trouble if he says yes, and he is in trouble if he says no.

Our familiarity with Jesus' famous answer threatens to dull its brilliance. After asking them to show him a coin,¹⁸ Jesus asks whose image is on the coin. "Caesar's," they respond, and Jesus performs a proverbial mic drop in instructing them to "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Matthew tells us they were amazed and went away.

As clever as the trap was, Jesus' response was remarkably wise. In asking for a denarius, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter of politics and authority, as coinage was then and remains now a marker of political sovereignty. There is a reason Roman emperors fashioned their coins complete with their own pictures and had these coins put into circulation. Modern American currency also bears the images of our political heroes, and defacing money is a crime still policed by the Secret Service.¹⁹ As Augustine's teacher Ambrose of Milan said, Jesus' Jewish audience would not have missed the deeper meanings of his response.²⁰

¹⁷Think of all the times when Jesus says "My time has not yet come . . ."

¹⁸Not surprisingly, Jesus had no money on him, it seems.

¹⁹Destroying legal tender violates Title 18, Section 333 of the United States Code, which says that whoever mutilates, cuts, disfigures, perforates, unites or cements together, or does any other thing to any bank bill, draft, note, or other evidence of debt issued by any national banking association, Federal Reserve Bank, or Federal Reserve System, with intent to render such item(s) unfit to be reissued, shall be fined not more than \$100 or imprisoned not more than six months, or both.

The law is policed by the Secret Service.

²⁰Ambrose of Milan, "Sermon Against Auxentius," in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 74.

The first takeaway is the obvious one. Caesar's image is on the coin, representing Caesar's authority in the political system that provides, however rough by our modern standards, public goods, services, justice, and stability. Caesar has some sort of claim on the resources with which the government maintains a system of law and order. In other words, government holds legitimate authority and rightly places certain obligations on those under its care. As we have already intimated, government is a part of God's plan to preserve the good and restrain evil until this present age is concluded and history ends. Jesus here indicates the legitimacy of government, and of paying taxes, something he confirms in another passage in which he could but does not claim an exemption from the temple tax as the son of God (Matthew 17:24-26).

The conclusion that government as such has a legitimate role to play would not strike Jesus' fellow Jews as remarkable in any way. Much of the Old Testament presupposes this truth. When prophets challenge political leaders in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is because they are ruling unjustly, not that they are ruling at all. That Jesus' interlocutors can produce Roman coinage tells us they have accepted some degree of Roman rule just by being implicated in the use of the oppressors' economic system. Jesus' acknowledgment of government authority in principle, then, may not have been surprising, even if his nod to Caesar and the particular Roman government was. Nevertheless, there's another more subtle lesson to be drawn from this famous interaction.

If the first half of Jesus' answer tells us something about earthly government and Caesar's authority, what about the second half? "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's" seems straightforward enough, but what about "give to God what is God's?" On first read this might strike us as paradoxical. Doesn't everything belong to God (see Psalm 24:1)? What can possibly be given to God that he doesn't already have? In one sense this is true. But might some things belong to God in a particular, special way?

We think so. Just as God declared that all of creation was very good but also set apart human beings as relating to him in a special way, so we can say that all of creation belongs to God but that human beings belong

to God in a particular way. Note the parallel Jesus draws here between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. We can identify Caesar's legitimate claim to tax the people's property by his image seen in the coins. So it is with giving to God what is his. What—or rather, *who*—bears God's image? Jesus' Jewish audience would see his allusion to the Genesis narrative that we discussed above. Men and women bear God's image, and thus all human beings belong to God in a special way. Caesar has a legitimate claim on the money that bears his image; God has a special claim on us as we bear his image.

We believe this adds a powerful corollary to the relatively straightforward teaching that the institution of government is legitimate: *the scope of legitimate governmental authority is limited*. The government can act on its claim to tax some of our goods, but it cannot act as if human beings belong wholly to governments. Jesus' stark distinction between what is due to God and to Caesar punctuates this point, challenging the divine lineage attributed to Caesar in the denarius's inscription.²¹ Human beings are subject to a higher authority, we belong to him in whose image we are made, and thus when governments mistreat human beings they interfere with a power beyond their authority and their reckoning. And someday they will be held to account for it. All earthly governments are rightly understood as *relative to and secondary to God's divine governance*.

We understand Jesus in this passage to be building on the truths of the early chapters in Genesis. First, government has a legitimate role to play in our lives, and some political conclusions seem to follow from this (e.g., taxes might be too high, but taxation isn't intrinsically wicked; anarchism is incompatible with Christian teaching). Second, governmental claims on human beings are limited as we belong to God. We might add a third claim here, that governments exist for human beings rather than human beings existing for the purposes of governments. But the relationship between God, governments, and human beings is a thorny one, and we

²¹The Roman denarius bore the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." See www.bibleref.com/Matthew/22/Matthew-22-20.html. Accessed May 14, 2024. Thanks are due to David Vander Laan for the reminder of this additional context.

need what is perhaps the most famous biblical passage on politics to develop our treatment of it more fully.

Romans 13:1-7: “For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good.” If government has no authority over us, then we need not worry about our duties toward political officials. The same thing follows if government is our ultimate authority, as posited by totalitarian regimes. But if government can have some legitimate authority underneath the ultimate authority of God, then we are faced with the thorny task of determining at what point our loyalty to our earthly authorities must give way to God’s ultimate authority over us as image-bearers. The well-known encounter between the authorities and the apostles that culminates in Acts 5:29 demonstrates that God’s authority ultimately trumps human authority.²² However, the opening seven verses in Romans 13 make a strong corresponding case for the God-ordained authority of magistrates, described by Paul as “God’s servants” or “God’s ministers” no less than three times in this passage.

We won’t pretend to offer a comprehensive treatment of all the different ways this passage has been interpreted, as this has been hotly contested ground for Christian thinkers for quite some time. Nevertheless, because we think Scripture is God-breathed and remains authoritative for believers today, we can draw some lessons from Paul’s robust endorsement of the governing authorities, who have been established by God.

First, this passage echoes Jesus’ teaching that Caesar has a legitimate role. Paul expands on this by pointing out that with this ruling authority comes our obligation to “be subject to” the government. As already noted, this is not an absolute obligation, but it is nevertheless a strong one and for several reasons. God has established these authorities, and it is their role to act as “God’s servant for our good,” and this includes

²²“We must obey God rather than human beings!” It’s true that this refusal is made to the Sanhedrin, which was a religious authority, but we must remember that the distinction between religious and political authorities was not as clear as our modern arrangements. The Sanhedrin had a version of a police force and the power to arrest and imprison the apostles.

acting as “agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” It follows then that our motivation to obey stems not only from our recognition of God’s delegated authority but also from our very natural fear of being punished for doing wrong. Paul explains that we pay taxes because the magistrates govern full-time, which implies Paul views the task as so important that those carrying it out should not be distracted by other means of making a living. Finally, Paul goes beyond the monetary and encourages us to pay honor and respect, if they are owed.

Notable Christian thinkers have understood Paul’s teaching differently. Luther and Calvin, for example, interpret Paul to mean that ordinary Christians subject to a vile tyrant can pray for relief and disobey orders to betray the faith, but cannot take up arms to overthrow the “magistrates” whom God has appointed.²³ Other Christians later interpreted the passage in another way, arguing that Paul defines the magistrates who act as God’s servants by affirming what is right and punishing what is wrong. If there are tyrants in power who invert this formula by affirming wrong or punishing right, the reasoning follows, then one plausible interpretation is that they are not the magistrates Paul has in mind to whom we categorically owe taxes, respect, and honor.

We don’t need to settle this debate to glean that the government’s mandate from God involves upholding justice, serving with authority for our good, and punishing evil. Notably, the fact that Paul is writing to Christians living under a pagan regime suggests that the categories of good and evil here are creational more than redemptive; that is, even non-Christians will at least in part understand and operate within shared moral frameworks with Christians.

This passage also reinforces what Jesus affirmed in Matthew: government places legitimate claims on those under its care, including (in principle) taxes that Christians should pay. We also think this passage’s

²³Calvin hints at an idea that his successors would develop, namely that lower magistrates might resist tyrannical rule by virtue of their own public authority. See *Institutes*, bk. IV, chap. XX, especially secs. 22-32, 668-76. Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority,” in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39.

mentioning of the sword is not, contra some of our pacifist brothers and sisters, merely metaphorical. Rather, Paul's teaching in Romans maintains continuity with the Old Testament assumption that governments must at times employ coercion to provide justice and stability through restraining evil. The idea of what Luther calls "office"—the unique, divinely appointed authority for justified power given to rulers—arises from Paul's distinction between individual, private vengeance (prohibited in Romans 12) and God-ordained use of just force by rulers in Romans 13.

Another wrinkle emerges from this passage when we apply it to our contemporary context. While many and perhaps most Christians reading this passage have lived in political regimes such that the magistrate or political sovereign was an external figure, Christians living in constitutional democracies or republics relate differently to those governing authorities. Whereas Luther and Calvin would understandably see the magistrates as perched at the top of the governing pyramid of sorts, and thus conclude that opposition to kings and queens is paramount to opposing that which God has instituted, we Christians in Western-style democracies find ourselves differently situated.

For when American Christians in particular consult their own founding political documents, we discover the political sovereign is "We the People," indicating not so much a top-down approach but rather a recognition that elected political officials act as "public servants" to further the common good, authorized by the delegation of power derived from the consent of the governed. Thus, the political authorities are not "out there," external to us, but rather we make up part of the grounding political sovereignty that then empowers those public officials at the local, state, and federal level. All citizens exercise political authority.

Christians should draw three crucial lessons from Romans 13 when applied to the contemporary American political context.²⁴ First, we are called to *yield* to political authority. That is to say, following the above

²⁴Which is not to say these are the only lessons to draw from this passage.

reading of Matthew 22 and other passages in Scripture, political authorities have a limited but legitimate claim on our obedience and support (see also 1 Peter 2:13-17, Titus 3:1). We obey peace officers, pay our taxes, and honor our elected leaders not only because we fear the costs of not doing so, but because honor and taxes and respect are due to them, and our consciences testify that this is the case.²⁵

Second, we are called to *wield* that same political authority. When we consult our particular political context, we find that as citizens of a constitutional democracy in which authority derives from “We the People,” we are part of the human sovereignty that gives our political institutions their legitimacy. This “wielding” of political authority will look different for different people. Not everyone will run for office or serve as a judge. But even the most ordinary citizens in our political system can act in their official capacity in voting, serving on juries, paying taxes, and petitioning the government. In democratic systems, we the people simultaneously govern and are governed; we yield to government authority while we also wield political power. This means that we must all attend carefully to Paul’s instructions to *rulers*, not just his instructions to those under the authority of rulers.

Finally, not only does Paul’s teaching instruct us to yield to political authority, and in our case engage in modest ways to wield that authority, but by extension we recognize that in the plurality of our pre-eschaton society, citizens *share* that authority with neighbors who do not necessarily share moral convictions nor the underlying worldviews that give rise to those convictions.²⁶ Nothing in Paul’s writings indicates he assumed Christians would be living in a predominantly God-fearing or Christian culture, and it is interesting that Nero was the Roman emperor when Paul penned the epistle to the Romans. If the above reading of this passage is sound, we are left with a fascinating, puzzling, and divine calling: how to live well as Christians in a pluralistic society in which

²⁵This is not to say that such legitimate powers cannot be abused.

²⁶For those who may not be persuaded that authority is shared, chap. 3 engages the question of plurality and its normative implications at significantly greater length.

God calls us to *yield* to political authority, *wield* political authority, and *share* that authority.

CONCLUSION

Given that the New Testament does not include a blueprint for politics, Christians of every generation have had to navigate these challenges, and our generation is no exception. Paul presupposes that his audience in Romans will understand what it means and why it is important for governments to commend and promote the good, punish evil, use coercion as a means, and receive the support necessary (taxes, honor, respect) to fulfill this calling. Moreover, these purposes for government in the service of human flourishing are universally intelligible. One does not have to be a Christian to understand and affirm government's dual role in promoting the good and punishing evil. God has not been stingy with the resources he has given us to fulfill this calling, and the natural law is part of his good provision for our and our neighbors' flourishing.

Yet Christians understandably will want to know how to understand the relationship between the biblical framework we claim as our foundation and the natural law approach we think contributes to applying sound norms and principles to real-life political and moral issues in our current context. We move to consider that very relationship in the next chapter, describing the witness of Scripture and the Christian tradition to the reality of the natural law.

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