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Towards a Biblical View on Politics

Andrew Basden

British evangelical Christians don't get involved in politics very much or very often. But evangelicals in the 19th century did, and changed the world for God. So should Christians today? According to a growing number of writers, they should.

A First View of Politics

In the Whitefield Institute's *Briefing Paper Thinking Christianly About Politics*, Andrew Goddard highlights the paucity of the view taken by many. On the one hand, traditional Christian teaching on politics has too easily "advocat[ed] uncritical acceptance of established political authority" by being based on, for example, Romans 13 and "Render to Caesar", ignoring the many texts that advocate criticism of the authorities. On the other hand, politics can become an idol that "feeds off people's devotion, but instead of meeting their real needs, simply creates more chaos." He deplores some Christian politicians who appeal to only one or two doctrines to support their political stance, and tries to set a Christian approach to politics in a wider theological context. In his paper he argues that Christians should be more involved in politics.

He characterises politics as "inextricably bound up with coercive rule and the power of enforcement", and defines its "proper role" as being to curb evil by means of this power. In doing so, he puts into words what many of us believe.

But this is only a first step in understanding politics; we can go further, to a richer view of politics that is more satisfying. The purpose of this Paper is to discuss this further, richer view.

Augustine's View

Goddard bases his view on Augustine's writings, especially *The City of God*. Augustine's theme is that there are two 'cities', of God and of the world, that are against each other. The city of God comprises those who love God rather than self and that of the world, those who love self rather than God. The city of God will eventually triumph. It is ultimately independent of state or society, and cannot even be identified with the Church, since only God knows where each person's love is directed. Likewise the city of the world is not necessarily to be identified with Rome.

Augustine sees politics as of little eternal importance, and allows it only a minimal role. Goddard expounds some of the reasons why Augustine believes this. First, in Genesis 1:26-28, where God tells humanity to "have dominion over" various parts of the creation, what we are given 'dominion' over does not include other human beings. Therefore it cannot be God's ultimate intention that human beings will have 'dominion' over each other. Second, Jesus' authority was of a different kind. Third, because some Scriptures (e.g. Rom.13) support coercive power, however, politics must be God's will during this present era in which sin and evil abound, in that it provides humanity with a mechanism to curb evil. But, even so, politics is

not effective in dealing with evil since the only real answer is redemption through Christ.

An Unsatisfying View

This view of politics is essentially a negative view, possibly deriving partly from Augustine's experience within a pagan political system in which coercive power was the norm and was cruel. If the value of politics lies only in the curbing of sin and evil, and yet does not effectively deal with them, it would seem to have no eternal significance, and no role in God's final kingdom.

This is an unsatisfying view of politics. One could be forgiven for thinking that time or effort spent in politics is a waste, when compared with more 'ultimate' and 'redemptive' activity such as evangelism. The result is that Christians tend not to get involved in politics, not even to curb evil. Further, this view does not seem to offer any principled way of relating politics to such things as economics, environment, foreign policy, social services, provision of infrastructure, etc. One's stance on such things is then at the mercy of the political party one belongs to or one's own personal interest, and not subjected to the critique of Scripture.

It is also a view that cannot give much practical guidance on political involvement. If politics is given by God, we can expect that at least some of his people will be called to engage in it, but the Augustine-based view gives us no basis for deciding who is called. If I feel a concern over the destruction of God's creation, how do I decide whether that constitutes God's call to become involved in politics, as opposed to my own personal feeling? And what kind of activity should I be involved in? Politics is to curb evil - yet what methods of limitation are valid? When is the method of limitation actually more evil than that which it is trying to prevent? Politics, we are told, is about the coercive power of enforcement - but when and how should we use that power? And what should be enforced? When should we accept, and when reject, established authority? Politics, we are told, is fraught with dangers, yet how do we recognise, meet and avoid the dangers? Not only does this view of politics provide no direct guidance for addressing such issues, it does not offer any basis on which to seek guidance.

A third problem with the Augustinian conception of what politics entails is that it does not agree with the full Biblical view. For example, Luke 22:30 strongly suggests that humans will rule over others in God's Kingdom. More importantly, the logic of his argument is weak, namely that since

Genesis 1:28 does not speak of dominion over human beings, then it is outside God's intention. It is dangerous to build a complete system of thought, in which the effect is to relegate such an important topic as politics to secondary status, on the mere absence of a mention, especially as its absence can be explained in other ways. But, as we shall see, the main difference is that the Augustinian view misses some positive things found in Scripture.

Though Augustine was one of the greatest theologians of all time, he was always influenced by his early life and by the philosophy of Plato, to elevate the importance of the spiritual world and denigrate things of this material world. It was no wonder that he gave politics a secondary role. Also, in seeing politics as coercive power, we can detect the influence of Roman rule.

A Richer Type of Politics

Paul Marshall's excellent book, *Thine is the Kingdom*, gives a starting point for a much richer, more positive view of politics that is more satisfying and able to guide us in practice. After noting its root in the Greek word *polis* (which means management of public affairs) Marshall starts from the same point as Augustine, the Cultural Mandate of Genesis 1:26-28. However, instead of arguing from missing words, Marshall examines closely the meaning of the Hebrew word that is translated as "have dominion over": *radah*. He finds it to be more like stewardship and management than coercive power or what we would think of as domination.

Our Western concept of dominion is contaminated by Aristotle's monarchianism, to become something harsh and self-seeking. Such would be the type of power Augustine experienced in the Roman empire. But from passages like Ezekiel 34, where God condemns the self-seeking type of *radah* practised by the "shepherds of Israel", it is clear that in God's eyes *radah* should be used to the benefit of the ones managed, and not for our own benefit, convenience or pleasure. This accords with Genesis 2:15, where humanity's role is as gardener and guard.

Marshall continues by linking this with the Hebrew concept embodied in the word *tsedeq*, which English Bibles translate as 'justice' and 'righteousness'. Because these two words have connotations in English that differ from that of *tsedeq*, Marshall defines the latter as "maintaining right relationships among all things in the created order." Note that this involves not just relation-

ships between human beings, but also relationship with animals, stewardship of the planet, economics, social services, defence, etc. What 'right' means is based on *tsedeq* principles laid down by God, but which have always to be worked out afresh in each culture and context, and Marshall spends some time examining how this has occurred in various stages throughout Old Testament life. He then works out two modern examples in detail.

So we can bring these together: *radah* is the mandate to engage in political activity, and *tsedeq* defines the direction, goals and style of that activity. Political activity is therefore part and parcel of our being God's representatives on earth, and is meant to demonstrate the very heart of God in his love for the weak, the poor and in fact for all his creation.

***Tsedeq-Radah* Politics**

But what is this politics, this combination of *tsedeq* and *radah*, like? It does not necessarily involve coercive power, so much as the working out of Biblical principles of *tsedeq* in the local situation, explaining them in ways that are attractive and understandable to those without any knowledge of God, and seeking to be persuasive and responsive. Authority structures and coercive power are seen as merely a means of engaging in politics, and not the core of politics itself. They are necessary, but are not the only means, as will be demonstrated below. Therefore, Augustine's view is now seen as a specialisation of the view discussed here, in which the means and the core have been confused.

It is now easy to see how politics can relate to economics, health, environment, foreign affairs, etc. These things are of 'the created order', and it is our responsibility to manage the relationships between them. For example, consider economics. It is assumed (by Western politicians at least) to be the main criterion by which nations, communities, businesses or organisations are judged, and to provide the main goals for which we aim. But under the view outlined here, economics is a mechanism by which we can more effectively steward God's creation for its own good. This implies major changes to the way we view and practise economics.

Who should be involved in politics? Everyone should be. The Cultural Mandate given to us in Genesis 1 is to all people, both male and female equally (see v.27). This does not mean that everyone should stand for election, nor that everyone is called to exercise authority; there are many ways in which each of us is called upon to "manage and

maintain right relationships among all things in the created order" - even in our everyday lives.

Unlike the Mosaic covenant, this mandate has never been rescinded. It is still in force, and we are called upon to obey. Marshall argues this cogently, and provides answers to suggestions such as "If Jesus is about to return, and this earth is to be destroyed (2 Pet. 3:10), then what's the point of stewarding it?" (His answer is based on the importance of obedience, and other writers like Walsh and Middleton (1984) have pointed out that it is likely that the correct rendering of 2 Pet. 3:10 is that this earth will be 'renewed' rather than destroyed.) In fact, several passages clearly imply that the creation has a role in eternity. Col. 1:20 and Eph. 1:10 say that the whole creation will be summed up in Christ, and Heb. 1:1-3 says that the creation will be Christ's inheritance. Rom. 8:19-21 tells us that the creation will enjoy the same kind of release as we will at the resurrection. Therefore what we do to it (via our *radah*) is likely to leave its mark, throughout eternity. This kind of thinking completely escaped Augustine, who was influenced by Greek thinking about the transience of the material world. Readers interested in following this further are referred to Paul Marshall's more recent book, *Heaven is Not My Home*.

So we see that politics as a combination of *tsedeq* and *radah* is no longer a secondary, holding operation to limit evil (though it does do that) but is a positive and primary mandate given by God before the Fall. This Cultural Mandate is a command of equal status with Jesus' Great Commission. So we can begin to see that this kind of politics might even have eternal significance. Though we are in the realms of interpretation here, it seems likely that the result of our *tsedeq-radah* will be to beautify, develop and prepare the creation for the One who will inherit it.

What are the dangers of politics? One mentioned by Goddard is that it can become an idol that demands devotion. But politics can go wrong for other reasons too, including injustice (which is disobedience against *tsedeq*) and complacency (which is disobedience against *radah*). The answer to dangers is not to avoid politics, but it is the same answer to all idolatry and sin: the cross of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in those involved. It is not politics that is the problem, but politicians - and that means everyone.

An Example

My own political activity has involved other means than coercive power. I have been involved

in commenting on and influencing local land use plans, such as the Cheshire Structure Plan, the Warrington Borough Plan, and about half a dozen others, as well as local transport plans, etc. While most contributors to the local plan consultation process represent vested interests, and seek to steer the plans to meet those interests, we employed a different approach. First, we sought to establish principles of *tsedeq* that were especially relevant to the purposes of the plan. One example: for a land use plan, the requirement to steward the natural creation suggests the need for environmentally sensitive integration of human activity with the natural world, rather than (as we have it now) defining a few protected areas and allowing the rest to be 'up for grabs'. Then, in the second part, we commented on how each proposed policy either fulfilled or went against the principles set out in the first part. By and large, the local authority planners have been impressed with our work and we have had some influence (though other factors limit that).

Conclusion

So we see that Scripture contains a very positive view of political activity, as the combination of *radah* with *tsedeq*. It involves managing all the relationships among things in the created order, as stewards, and for the good of the creation itself rather than for our own good.

Because all the creation will one day be summed up in Christ, such political activity is of eternal significance. Everyone is called to be involved in such political activity, but it involves many means and not just what is normally considered political authority. There are dangers, of course, but these can be recognised and avoided. I suggest that this view of politics is much richer than the Augustinian one, deeply satisfying, and that it provides a Biblical framework which Christians can work out in practice.

Books for Further Reading

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| B Goudzwaard, | <i>Idols of our Time</i>
(Illinois: IVP, 1981) |
| P Marshall, | <i>Thine is the Kingdom</i>
(Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1984) |
| P Marshall, L Gilbert L, | <i>Heaven is Not My Home; Learning to Live in God's Creation</i>
(Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) |
| B J Walsh, J R Middleton, | <i>The Transforming Vision; Shaping a Christian World View</i>
(Illinois: IVP, 1984) |

A copy of Andrew Goddard's Paper *Thinking Christianly About Politics* (November 1996) is available free of charge by sending a stamped addressed envelope to the Whitefield Institute, Frewin Court, Oxford OX1 3HZ.

Dr. Andrew Basden is Reader in the Information Systems Institute at the University of Salford. From 1988-1998 he was joint Leader of a small evangelical church in Cheshire, U.K. He has been involved in politics in ways outlined in the paper, and has also stood for Parliament and other political office for the Green Party. He is willing to engage in email discussion of these issues via A.Basden@salford.ac.uk.