

# Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 8

## Public Theology and Politics

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Public theology and politics are a seemingly incompatible pairing. To contemporary eyes, the relationship between theology and politics is neither self-evident, necessary, nor good. The secular sentiment of our age has moved far beyond the Christian notion of the secular, that is that we live in the in-between period between Christ's first coming and his return, to a far more rigid conception of the secular that is preoccupied with the immanent; scientific rationalism and emotivism govern the policy-making conscience.

Even within the church, this view of public life has taken root. Nervous of being seen as overstepping our place, imposing our views, or even being deemed a little odd, the church has been reluctant to embrace a vision for politics in which public theology is to play any meaningful or distinctive role. Instead, our engagement with political questions has often been neutered by the secular liberal paradigm in which we operate. It is not a given that Christians would even embrace a fellow believer engaged in political activity. As Tim Farron MP discovered, it is simply too much of a "mucky business" for some believers.<sup>1</sup> What often seems like a more faithful vision for Christian living in the modern world can instead be a blunted one. Far from challenging

the secular character of public life, this represents an abdication of Christian responsibility and witness.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a prominent and oft-seen belief that we simply need more Christians in public life. The optimism is laudable, but a robust public theology demands not simply that we show up but that our character and content be transformed, renewed, and characterised by the gospel. The secular has little problem with believers being present, but it cannot handle an approach to public life animated by



Raphael, *St Paul Preaching in Athens* (1515)

<sup>1</sup> Tim Farron, et al., *A Mucky Business: Why Christians Should Get Involved in Politics* (London: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Whilst this approach is in many ways more welcome than a withdrawal from public life, it gives little spiritual direction to one's political activity or character, leaving believers vulnerable to being captured by the ideologies of the day and the vast array of temptations in political life, with both progressive and conservative bents on display in public life today.

Any Christian engagement with politics then must overcome not only the opposition of a secular conception of public life inherent in contemporary society and the church but also develop a rich and gospel-orientated conception of political life that gives due attention to both the character and the content of political activity. What explains our current malaise and what can be done?

Believers' tendency towards a view of public life that has emphasized and enforced the separation of the things of God and the things of this world is perhaps inspired by a misguided interpretation of two-kingdom theology.<sup>3</sup> Such sentiment is not without merit; after all, Jesus himself urged his followers to give to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's. Yet correctly interpreted, this passage is not relegating politics to the purview of the irrelevant and unspiritual but highlighting instead the limited and temporal power of earthly authorities beneath the one who is Lord of all. If the mere stamping of Caesar's face on the coinage of Rome is mark enough to justify the payment of taxes to the empire, how much more does the *imago Dei* stamped on all mankind justify the practice of governance and pursuit of public justice?

Contrary to the meek and neutered political character of secularised Christianity, the gospel is not uninterested in politics but scattered with political claims and appeals, notable amongst them the claim that Christ is the King, the herald and instigator of the kingdom of God. In Mark chapter 1, Jesus arrives with the revolutionary announcement that the kingdom of God has come near. In so doing, he makes a deliberate link to Old Testament prophecies regarding the promised King. In Luke, he begins his ministry by announcing the manifesto of

<sup>2</sup> See for example "Does the British Electorate Mind Politicians Doing God?" *Theos*, (June 2023), <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2023/06/07/does-the-british-electorate-mind-politicians-doing-god>.

<sup>3</sup> Theologians such as Augustine and Luther are widely regarded as contributing to the development of this doctrine outlining the separation between the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom or the temporal and spiritual realms. An exploration of the work of some more contemporary proponents of this idea can be found in Michael N. Jacobs, "The Resurgence of Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Survey of the Literature" in *Themelios* 45, no.2.

Isaiah's servant of the Lord. And in Matthew, he preaches the most famous sermon of all time, which is all about the kingdom of God. The gospel is political.

Of course, this is where one can go dramatically wrong and claim a divinely inspired mandate for one's own cultural or political preferences. Tim Keller famously resisted this error and rejected the co-option of the gospel as a party political tool, something David Koyzis explored in greater detail.<sup>4</sup> The gospel is not political in the sense of calling the believer to party politics, though one can have great fun with Ecclesiastes 10:2. Still, it is calling the believer to a new nationhood, a new citizenship, and ultimately a new King. This was clearly understood by the early church, which adopted the language of the political not in service of contemporary political trends but as a means of articulating the great revolution of which they were part.<sup>5</sup>

Faith in Christ necessarily involves service to a higher authority, as made clear in Jesus' remarks to Pilate in John 19 and displayed by the perception of earlier

<sup>4</sup> See Tim Keller, "How do Christians fit into the Two-Party System? They Don't," *New York Times*, (September 2018), and David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company," in *Together for the Common Good*, [https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/killing-for-the-telephone-company#\\_edn121](https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/leading-thinkers/killing-for-the-telephone-company#_edn121).



Masaccio, Tribute Money (detail)



Jacob Kielland Sømme, *Lay Peacher* (1889)

believers as political troublemakers seen in Acts 17. Yet this greater allegiance is not a call for the withdrawal from, or an antagonistic approach towards, the world. Rather, this heavenly citizenship comes with a heavenly task: to represent and embody the kingdom to come. Tom Holland's *Dominion* has, in recent years, captured the minds of those searching for an alternative to secularism.<sup>6</sup> Its pages present a tale in which the world was captivated by the rich vision of mercy, goodness and justice embodied in the person of Christ and pursued by his followers, not by an elaborate, well-executed, and well-resourced political campaign. The power of Christianity was unlike anything the world had seen before, and its spread came about through ordinary believers living lives of service, hardship and sacrifice, proclaiming that Christ is King and striving for the values of his kingdom.

The gospel, therefore, not only motivates an engagement with the political but also transforms the character and the direction of the politician, transforming every aspect of political life and reminding the believer that it is not enough simply to be present. The Christian armed with the Word of God does not slot into the existing political framework; rather, they have a prophetic role to challenge the sensibilities and methods of politics as is. They paint a picture of what could be, and what one day will be.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

To be a believer in politics, then, is to transcend the binaries of left and right in pursuit of the values of the kingdom that is to come. To pretend that this is a simple or uncomplicated task is naïve – public life is infamously messy and complex, and it can be all too easy for theologians and commentators to critique without ever having to take risks and embrace the difficulty involved in rolling up one's sleeves and joining the political frontline. Nevertheless, believers must avoid simplistic metanarratives and reductionism in their task. It is all too easy to overlook the nuances and structure of Scripture, and to misapply or misconstrue biblical texts for political life. For example, the gleaning laws of the Old Testament, rightly applied, do not demand their application to modern farming, but perhaps do call us to consider how and what care for the poor should look like. Instead, believers engaging with and working in politics need much wisdom, the accountability and encouragement of the Christian community, and dependence on Scripture and prayer, driven by the Spirit. Yet public theology and politics are an invaluable pairing. For engaging in public life, especially politics, is a means by which we can serve our King and work for public justice and righteousness. In so doing, we bring flourishing not just to the believer but to a people made in the image of God, who thrive when restored to harmony with the order for which they were designed.

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