

## TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF POLITICS

Paul Woolley

**'We don't do politics. I'm sorry, we don't do politics.'** It's the opposite of Alistair Campbell's widely reported retort, 'We don't do God' position, but it's a classic Christian one – and it's deeply flawed.

Mark 12:17 seems the obvious place to start when thinking about developing a theology of politics. In response to some Pharisees and Herodians who were trying to trap him with a question about the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus said, 'Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'. Mark notes that 'they were utterly amazed at him'. Why were they amazed?

The trick question posed to Jesus was of the classic 'When did you stop beating your wife?' variety. Whichever way he answers, Jesus will be in trouble, either with the religious leaders or the Roman authorities. Commenting on the text, Tom Wright argues that, 'The closest echoes to this double command are found in 1 Maccabees 2.68. Mattathias is telling his sons, especially Judas, to get ready for revolution. "Pay back to the Gentiles what is due to them," he says, "and keep the law's commands".' It is doubtful that 'paying back the Gentiles' referred to money. The revolutionary hint can't be ignored. Standing there, looking at a coin, Jesus' surface meaning was that the tax had to be paid; but underneath there was the strong hint that Caesar's regime was a blasphemous nonsense that one day God would overthrow. Is that what amazed Jesus' hearers?

The 'God and Caesar' text is frequently used to justify the separation of 'religion' and 'politics'. However, the 'religious- secular' divide is an enlightenment construct, not a New Testament one. Jesus is clear that Caesar has some legitimate authority, but under God's authority. In the words of Richard Bauckham, 'Jesus' point is not that God has no rights over Caesar, but that God's rights do not exclude Caesar's. Of course, Caesar's exercise of his right to taxation might on occasions conflict with God's law – he might exceed his right – but the right itself was allowed by God's law.'

In developing a theology of politics, it is important to put three building blocks in place. It's crucial, firstly, to reject the idea that theology and politics are unconnected or even incompatible. Jürgen Moltmann comments 'Its subject alone makes Christian theology a *theologia publica*, a public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of the hope of Christ for the kingdom of God.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Storrar, 'Introduction', 1.

Secondly, we should recognise that there is a legitimate role for political authority. Government is part and parcel of the created order. It's a thoroughly good thing. Politics is about organising our economic, social and cultural life. It's about restraining evil and promoting the common good, not just the interests of those in power. The positive view of government in the New Testament is seen in texts like Romans 13 and 1 Timothy 2:1-8.

Thirdly, politics should be kept in its proper place. The negative view of government is evident in texts like Revelation 13. The role of the political authorities is an important one, but it's not all-important. Karl Barth makes clear that the 'civil community' can 'only have external, relative, and provisional tasks and aims'.<sup>2</sup> The fifth article of the Barmen Declaration rejected the idea that the state should usurp the functions of the Church by becoming the 'single and total order of human life'.<sup>3</sup>

'Salvation', according to Stanley Hauerwas, 'is a concrete alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called church'.<sup>4</sup>

The question is how should the Church and government relate? Secular neutrality doesn't exist. It's a myth. In its actions, governments, of whatever party, preference some notions of the good over others, and they are right to do so. The role of the Christian community is to shape those notions of the good and speak truth to power, especially when government oversteps the mark.

In practice this means that political engagement – voting, joining political parties and standing for office – is a critical part of Christian discipleship. Christianity and politics aren't incompatible; they're inseparable.

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, *Community*, 151.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas, *Dictionary*, 76.

<sup>4</sup> Hauerwas, *Christendom*, 35.