

# **The Ballot And The Bible – How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics And Where We Go From Here**

**Kaitlyn Schiess, Brazos Press a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023**

## **Synopsis**

The Ballot and the Bible by Kaitlyn Schiess is a thorough, sobering, and hopeful examination of the ways the Bible has been used and abused in American Politics. A majority of this book is examining how the Bible was interpreted throughout various eras of American History. This was extremely enlightening to see how American perspectives have shifted through time and how verses have backed or condemned different theologies that were popularized. Kaitlyn also looks at popular Christian political phrases such as “City on a hill,” “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” and “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city” and how those phrases may or may not have upheld original intent. The Ballot and the Bible has important content which is clear even for those without advanced training in history or theology. Even for the reader with advanced training in either discipline, will find the book interesting and worthy of a read. Perhaps my favorite aspect of the book is its fair approach to the partisan aspects of politics. This book is not a one-sided takedown or attack but rather a balanced approach to the subject.

## **Introduction: Is That Your Bible**

- We live in a Bible-haunted nation. Our history is full of politicians invoking biblical images. Much of our shared language from the Old and New Testaments. Our national story has been shaped by biblical accounts of wandering, exile, and redemption. For all our familiarity with the Bible, we are woefully ignorant about how or why we are using the Bible in politics.
- To be clear, this book will not give you a list of interpretation methods or rules, nor will it give the definitive interpretations of the passages that are typically referenced in political conversations. Instead, it poses the question “Is this your Bible?” to the complicated and contentious history of politics. It notes moments of proper application and examples of deep misuse. It describes examples of biblical argumentation from pastors, politicians, pundits, and ordinary people.
- In focusing on American history, this book has two goals: 1) to mine history for examples of biblical interpretation distanced enough from our own context that we might be able to see things clouding our judgment in the heat of our own debates, and 2) to gain a rough sketch of some of the political biblical-interpretation trends and traditions that have shaped America. If we want to understand Scripture better and apply it more faithfully – as well as to converse with compassion and conviction on topics where we are in disagreement with others – we will need to know our Bible and our history. We will need to examine not only our stated principles of biblical interpretations but also the habits of our hearts.

## **Chapter 1 – A City on a Hill: An American Legacy of Puritan Biblical Interpretation**

- What began as a religious call for right living in 1630 (John Winthrop) became a defense of American exceptionalism in the Cold War era (Ronald Reagan). For Reagan, the city on a hill powerfully revved up American pride. The “city upon a hill” image exemplifies a common problem: we pluck promises of provision or judgment that were given Israel or the church and apply them wholesale to America. Our judgment that were given to Israel or the church and apply them wholesale to America. Before we rush into pulling passages from Scripture and applying them to our own political context, we need to have a hermeneutic that can prevent us from misapplication and misunderstanding.
- A legacy of using the language of biblical covenants to describe our nations is a robust one in American history. You have probably heard or seen 2 Chronicles 7:14 referenced during election seasons: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” We read our own nation back into text and tend to replace the rewards of these promises with our own national ambitions. When we come to biblical texts looking for political instruction, we are never coming as blank slates.

- There are some unique challenges when it comes to thinking about covenants in political theology. We need to be careful about how we read God's covenants in relation to our own time and God's providence, where we place ourselves in God's story, and how we apply God's Word in our different contexts.
- We tend to take promises of blessing and judgment from different covenants and apply them to our own communities. We also read Scripture as if we know with certainty where we stand in it.

There is a pitfall when we misapply biblical covenants to our own nations and miss the covenant for all nations that is actually in the Bible. The Noachian covenant and the prophecies against the nations should shape the demands we as citizens make on our governments. In Scripture, covenants are initiated by God: God begins the conversation, sets the terms, and graciously invites humans into special relationship with him. When we set the terms of our own covenants, we will claim promises that are not ours to claim, such as a divine right to a land God never gave.

- Richard Bauckham says that our reading of Scripture for politics needs to be “both more disciplined and more imaginative” than current attempts. This will require knowing our Bible and ourselves better, and it will require reliance on the Holy Spirit as much as reliance on Bible-study tools. We need to be wary of pulling passages out of their context. But we also need to be wary of any approach to Scripture that does not place both the text and our own work in the larger context of God's redemptive story. First and foremost, the biblical text's rightful place is within the economy of God's communicative grace.
- The complicated history of the little phrase, city on a hill reminds us to interrogate the overly familiar language coursing through our political system. We need to have eyes to see repeated patterns and hearts intent on seeking after God's truth above all else.

## **Chapter 2 – Submission and Revolution: Romans 13 and American Identity**

- Romans 13:1-7 is the quintessential political passage. In America, “Romans 13” is shorthand for “The Bible commands obedience to government authorities.” We tend to invoke passage like Romans 13 selectively depending on the issue or politician.
- Romans 13:1-7 deals with a specific example of the kinds of obligations that a Christian has both within the church and outside it – obligations that prioritize the common good of others above individual rights. Paul is concerned not only with articulating some of these obligations but also with redrawing the boundaries of the people of God. Since the people of God are no longer bound by ethnicity or nationality, they must consider what it means to live well in various political arrangements.
- Romans 13:1-7 does not provide a clear application to all Christians in all times and places. Rather, it gives a general exhortation as to the posture Christians should have toward governing authorities. These seven verses, rather than offering a complete Christian theory of government, exhort believers to recognize their various obligations to others, including obligations that take distinctly political forms. When it comes to applying teachings like this to our own contexts we should discern the moral logic of the passage and determine what that posture and way of thinking demand of us today. As we read Scripture, we can ask not only what is allowed and what is forbidden but also why, how, and when. How are the biblical authors, inspired by the Spirit, approaching moral problems as complex as the ones we face? What story about faithfulness is told here, and how can we model it?
- When it comes to interpreting the Bible in politics, we all cherry-pick verses. Whatever our motives, our political conversations will never go anywhere so long as we pit verse against verse, stacking preferences like tally points against one another. We need to learn how to integrate biblical truths across the canon, think about how passages help interpret each other, and refuse to base an entire political position on select verses. We need to practice reasoning well with each other (and with ourselves) by refusing to ease the inherent tension between “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” and “We must obey God rather than human beings.” Different political circumstances – different times and places, with different histories and moral questions – will require different biblical emphases, and knowing what passage is fitting for any given moment will require wisdom, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the assistance of the whole communion of saints (both our neighbors now and the witness of Christians throughout global history).
- The opposite of cherry-picking Bible verses is not separating theology from politics. Rather, it is doing good political theology. When we arrive at a pressing political concern with no prior work done, we are more likely to

grab for easy verses that seem applicable (even if they aren't). when we have done the hard work of thinking about what God requires of human communities, rulers, and citizens – looking at the whole Bible for guidance, learning what Christians before us and beside us have done, incorporating the wisdom we can gain from sociology, history, and politics theory – we will be more prepared to address the problem in front of us.

### **Chapter 3 – “The Bible through Slave-Holding Spectacles”: The Bible in the Civil War**

- Civil War hermeneutics highlights many relevant issues for biblical interpretation and politics. It shows how our methods can be similar and yet we can come to different conclusions, how our biases play a significant role in our interpretation, and how our communities shape our political imaginations. We need to recognize our own biases and learn from the evil in our nation's history if we want our hermeneutics to be sound.
- The Civil War exemplifies America's strange relationship with the Bible. The Bible was described as a weapon of war, and stories spread about soldiers capturing Bibles from across battle lines as another form of offensive combat. The Civil War erupted at a time when America was awash in biblical language and references. But it was also a time when Americans were deeply divided over the Bible's meaning in public life. This context was ripe for a oral and political crisis.
- For the first fifty years of America's history, there were hardly any biblical defenses of slavery. Once the system of slavery was finally questioned, often on biblical grounds, the movement to defend it theologically sprang up with force. Slave-holding and pro-slavery Christian leaders wrote endlessly about the importance of the Bible to their position and the disregard their opponents had for Scripture. White abolitionists had their own favorite biblical passages.
- Moral arguments are never made in a vacuum. Just as the debates about the Bible and slavery were happening from particular contexts and perspectives, they were also happening in a particular theological context. This was a period with significant changes in biblical studies and theology.
- Black Christians approached Scripture very differently from their white abolitionists counterparts. Many preachers and writers referenced the Bible without concern over slavery passages. Instead, they went to passages about injustice and oppression, inhabiting biblical narratives of liberation and drawing on biblical language of condemnation of the wealthy and powerful for their own polemics.
- While white people fought about Germ historical criticism, idealist and transcendentalist philosophy, and the genealogy of Noah's sons, Black people approached the relationship between ethics and Scripture in an entirely different way. What does that teach us?
- Many of the scholars writing about the Bible in this period will contrast the “literal” hermeneutic of the South with the increasingly “liberal” hermeneutic of the North. But both white slaveholders and white abolitionists had their favorite verses, and both had narratives that made sense of those proof-texts. The question is not whether we read Scripture within a narrative framework but which framework we use. We are storytelling creatures, constantly making connections and drawing lines between different ideas, looking for themes and similarities, and trying to tell the kind of story that we would want to play a part in.
- Americans have always sensed that God is on “our side.” Everyone appealed to divine providence in this period, in a dizzying diversity of ways. The Civil war exemplifies the difficulties with understanding our early causes as part of a divine purpose – but it also exemplifies the faithful potential of believing in God's sovereignty.
- Perhaps the most significant lesson from this period, however, is not about any one passage of Scripture but the way we think about ethics and the Bible. Both abolitionists and pro-slavery writers sought a hermeneutic that would produce timeless, universal principles.
- Because we are finite creatures, we need help understanding the Bible, our contexts, and ourselves. Theology is the work of the church in response to the revelation of God. It seeks to harmonize, articulate, and apply the revelation given to God's people in God's Word. This is not about stripping off the outer garments of culture and particularity and finding the kernel of universal truth underneath but about seeking to grow in love and understanding of the God who has graciously revealed himself in human culture and particularity. Christians have always sought to harmonize the biblical account into universal truths.

- If there is any universal moral prescription in Scripture, it is the one white slaveholders and slavery defenders most often missed: sin will warp our moral intuition and biblical interpretation. We need the stories of Scripture and the witness of marginalized and oppressed people today to help us see clearly and hear the Word of the Lord in our particular time and place. We will not know how we should now live without living in community with people who can help us see ourselves, our world, and Scriptures clearly.

## **Chapter 4 – Your Kingdom Come: Social Gospel Hermeneutics**

- The social gospel looms large in evangelical criticisms of theology that motivate social reform or left-leaning activities. The term “social gospel” suffers from multiple misunderstandings. It can be defined in overly broad and overly narrow ways, its history is complex, and it has become a boogeyman in some circles. It is helpful to define the social gospel as a Christian movement that came about in a specific context. The social gospel movement came from a particular theological and historical context. Many social proponents shared two important experiences: theological training in institutions shaped by liberal theology and ministry in inner-city contexts. The social gospel movement largely developed as an outgrowth of the broader liberal theology project. But because the movement was less about doctrine and more about right action, it led to surprising friendships and coalitions. The social-gospel movement was shaped by both liberal Protestantism and evangelicalism. The movement was shaped by Scripture. Interest in social reform did not become a dividing line within the American church until the twentieth century.
- The social gospelers have a lot to teach us about how to use Scripture well for political purposes. They identified biblical passages that went unnoticed or unappreciated in many churches, they took exhortations to care for the vulnerable seriously and literally, and in a time when some theological trends encouraged replacing Scripture with social science, they held to its importance. This era of preachers, theologians, and activists can help us think better about the theology of Scripture, the relationship between the nation and the Bible, and what it means to take the Bible “literally.”
- We need to examine our own theological frameworks, emphases, and biases, and we need to read the whole Bible.
- Reading theologians and pastors from this period can help us clarify some good nonnegotiables: a) In the story of Scripture, God is the main character. b) Sin is both personal and communal. These two important frameworks combine to highlight something crucially important for us to learn from the social gospel: the depth of sin in the world requires divine action. If our readings of Scripture diminish either the cosmic or communal effects of sin or the priority of divine action, we lose the power and significance of Jesus's work on the cross. The social gospel often forgot the cross; its opponents often forgot why the cross was necessary.
- The social gospel movement helps us straighten out how we use the Bible in relation to our nation. The triumphs and failures of the social gospel should chasten our enthusiasm for our own “Christianizing” projects – whether to the right or the left.
- Rather than focusing on “literal” interpretations of Scripture, we should examine the hermeneutics we are bringing to the text.
- The history of the social gospel should be a reminder for all Christians to learn from our past with both a critical eye and a charitable heart. Not only might you discover that someone else's history is actually just as much your own, but that combination of criticism and generosity provides space to learn more widely and freely. For all its faults and failures, the social gospel movement in America emphasized biblical passages that had gone unnoticed, motivated institutions to create lasting change in communities, and continued the church's historic concern for social issues.

## **Chapter 5 – A Stick of Dynamite: Civil Rights and Scripture**

- Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech is as much a feature of the American story as Winthrop's “city upon a hill.” King's speech drew on biblical language for social and political work. King's reference to Isaiah 40:4-5 exemplifies how much the civil rights movement was energized by Scripture. This chapter focuses on the liberating message of the prophets and how marginalized Christians have found comfort and courage to fight for political change.

- Perhaps most significant about King's hermeneutic was the way he enlisted the present day people of God into the scriptural narrative. There was no sharp divide between the people of God in the Bible, the generations of Christians who come before him, and his own church. As a result, he could find in the Bible language of describing contemporary social and political concerns. King clearly saw himself in line with biblical prophets.
- King's "I Have a Dream" speech is remembered by many Americans with sentimental fondness but it is important to remember that it was given at an event that was considered radical and unsavory by many Americans at the time. King was preaching. He wove the story of the civil rights movement into the biblical story – the story of an oppressed people, promised flourishing by God, exalting God's redemptive work on behalf of all creation. King knew that the Word of God, spoken with authority and heard by the people of God, was effective to create change. He had seen it in his father's church.
- King and many other civil rights preachers and activists – first encountered Scripture in the context of the church community and felt bound to interpret it within that community. The words of the Bible are not open to any and every interpretation in part because they are intended to be interpreted in a particular context: the gathered people of God. It is in the church that Scripture is read, sung, rehearsed, and embodied. King learned this as a child growing up in a church, but he also worked for justice in the context of church communities and collaborations and never left behind the language of the church.
- Reading the Bible as the church's book means that passages cannot be abstracted away because the church is a community made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; sustained by the Holy Spirit; oriented toward seeking the flourishing of God's creation while awaiting final restoration.
- King learned in church that the preacher needed to interpret the Scriptures so that the past and present were alive, accessible, and fresh with possibilities for social and individual transformation.
- In his speeches and sermons, King described the ordinary work of organizing and protesting in terms of the cosmic struggle for justice, the biblical story of captivity and liberation, and divinely ordained plan for creation. While the activists knew that God was on the side of justice, they had little hope that society could be easily reformed through education or government policies. They did not buy the view that history was moving on an unbroken path of progress. They expected opposition, and many of them sacrificed greatly because of the steady hope that God would eventually honor their efforts – whether on earth or in eternity.
- For King, the civil rights movement fit within the terms and framework of the biblical world, because all of history does. He refused to grant political or social events a life of their own outside God's providence.
- King did not just read the Bible; he lived it. He revealed the absurdity and depravity of unjust social conditions by sitting at lunch counters, marching with the poor and marginalized, and walking instead of riding segregated buses. He provoked mass public outrage facing bomb threats, imprisonment, and eventually assassination. Why did people react with such vitriol at the marches or sit-ins. Richard Lisher says that perhaps "Bible-believing southerners suspected what ancient Israel knew, that the actions of these prophets, just as surely as their words, are the signs of a new order that is rapidly approaching."

## **Chapter 6 – Magic of the Market: The Hermeneutics of Small Government**

- This chapter will explore the biblical justifications Christians have given for small government, focusing on the Christian support for Ronald Reagan and "Reaganomics" in the 1980s. Today, the firm sense that small government is a biblical principle guides Christian debates about economic policy. Fears of government overreach were connected to fears of infringement on religious freedom. In a period of American history where conservative Christians felt culturally under attack, the fear was heightened that if the government became too powerful, it would naturally be used against Christians.
- No president is more burned into the collective consciousness of American Christians than Ronald Reagan. While George W. Bush was lauded as the most aggressively religious president Americans have ever had and early presidents like Washington or Jefferson hold special places in America's religious history, Reagan is the president within recent memory who took on a unique mythology that excused his various sins and deviations from the conservative Christian norm. Not only did Reagan begin a strong tradition of presidents proudly acknowledging God – asking blessing for the country, declaring their dependence, articulating their campaign as a calling – but in

his hesitance he nodded to Christian fears about cultural change and government overreach. Reagan masterfully combined descriptions of America as specially favored by God with biblical justifications for small government. He described government intervention as a breaking of the nation's covenant with God, with economic consequences. To be sure, Reagan would intervene in the market as much as his predecessors. Even still, he articulated these policies as a lack of intervention, as leaving what God had created in its natural state.

- “Reaganomics” looms large in the imagination of many conservative Christians today. And while Reagan played a significant role in molding the particular relationship between faith and economics in the United States, he was aided by pastors and theologians. Important truths to learn from the policy proposals presented in Robert Nash's *Poverty and Wealth* and Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* include: a) The Bible is concerned with the spiritual and the material. b) The Bible is directed to both individuals and communities. c) The Bible does not give us a blueprint for government, but it does leave us with some direction. d) The Bible is not the only source of truth, but it should shape how we interpret other sources. e) The Bible does not fit in predetermined political boxes. f) The clearest teaching of the Bible regarding politics is that we treat our opponents fairly.

## **Chapter 7 – Late Great United States: Biblical Eschatology in the Cold War**

- People are complicated. Our politics are not easily disconnected from our theology or morals. People are driven by emotion and imagination: even if the world is destined to fall apart before Christ's return, fear of suffering can easily animate political advocacy. Add in the increasing sense of cultural stigma and isolation that evangelicals felt during the cold war period and political advocacy might be necessary merely to maintain the ability to evangelize people before it is too late. Armed with increased political power and fresh confidence in the truthfulness of biblical prophecies, evangelicals fought for policies that seem confusing if not contradictory today.
- Key themes in the interpretive claims Hal Lindsey made in *The Late Great Planet Earth* and other bestselling books he wrote in 70s 80s, and 90s that shape our reading of Scripture include: a) The Bible is “definite” about the roles particular nations will play in the coming cosmic drama. b) Scripture is interpreted from a position of American superiority. c) Scripture is a puzzle or riddle to be deciphered. d) Scripture should be interpreted “literally” (sometimes). Lindsey highly values faithfulness to Scripture. e) This moment in history has special prophetic significance – and only now can we understand what the Bible means.
- How can we find spiritual exhortation and even political instructions in the Bible, without succumbing to the methods that produced *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Here are some things to keep in mind as we read prophecy with an eye toward the past, present, and future: a) Prophecy is not only predictive but also intended to provide critique, comfort, and confrontation. b) Read for the whole redemptive story; don't search for a hidden narrative. c) Practice hermeneutic, humility. d) Remember that Revelation was given to the church, not to an individual. e) Pay attention to your feelings. Politics and emotions shape Bible interpretations for us all. An attention to emotions will help us have better conversations with people who interpret the Bible – and our political context differently.
- While many prophecy interpreters during the cold war period placed a huge emphasis on the rapture, the details of the tribulation, and present indicators of the “end times,” they often placed very little emphasis on the parts of Christian eschatological hope that have enjoyed the most agreement among Christians across time and geography. While Revelation is unclear about many things, it is clear that Jesus Christ will ultimately exercise complete, just, and merciful rule over all creation, that God will dwell directly with his people and “wipe every tear from their eyes,” and that, in the end, God will make everything new (Rev. 21).

## **Chapter 8 – Prayer, Politics, and Personal Faith: George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's Use of Scripture**

- The Bible is deeply tangled with the American presidency. Biblical language still shapes our political rhetoric, and many voters still want to know that their president attends church, prays to God, and looks to Scripture for guidance. This chapter explores the role Scripture continues to play in our political imagination.
- The standards for George W. Bush and Barack Obama were vastly different: one had a reputation of religiosity but rarely quoted Scripture; the other used language from the Bible often, but rumors about his faith were so frequent that his campaign staff had to add a page to his website clarifying that he was not a Muslim.

- Bush tended toward identifying faith, prayer, and Scripture as internal, personal motivations for his political work. Obama was more likely to draw on the social-reform tradition of the church, and point to that legacy as the legacy of faith in America. Obama was also more likely to draw on biblical language than Bush, but he often used it more as part of the moral language of America than as a source of moral commandments. Bush was more in line with conservative Christians on social issues (and economic and military); Obama was more in line with progressive religious commitments to economic and racial justice. In short, Bush's public Christianity was mostly commitment to a social and religious identity; Obama's was more about speaking the language of the Christian faith.
- Some things to consider as we think more deeply about the meaning and purpose of faith in public:
  - We need to examine what influences are shaping our voting habits. Why did evangelicals respond so differently to Obama than they did to Bush? First, Obama came from a different religious tradition than white evangelicalism, and while he used familiar Christian language, his public work and personal faith did not match their expectations. Second, we cannot ignore the racism behind some evangelicals' disdain for President Obama. Last, and perhaps most obvious, Obama was a Democrat. It is worth reflecting on the following: a) What sources most influence our interpretation of candidates? b) What standards do we hold these sources to, and are they good and faithful? c) Do we care more about a candidate publicly claiming our "team" or using our language that we do about the faithfulness of their policies and personal life?
  - We need to be cautious – but not suspicious – about biblical language in public life. American public life throughout history has been shaped by biblical language. It is an important part of our shared history and sense of community. But there are dangers with thinking of biblical language this way: when the Bible is merely a reservoir of helpful moral and political language, it is easily abused.
  - We do not need to avoid Christian convictions in public life because others have misused or abused them. There are pitfalls to be sure, but ignoring the power of biblical language in our public life ignores the rich history of social reform and faithful political work that came before us.
- George W. Bush and Barack Obama are not perfect foils for each other. They both relied on Christian identity to make voters feel as if they could identify with them, they both quoted Scripture when it suited their political purposes, and neither of them held up as the ultimate example of faithful witness. Yet their crucial differences help us think more critically and carefully about what we expect of our leaders, the ways we ourselves are shaped and formed to participate politically, and how the Bible should or should not be used in public life.

## **Chapter 9 – “Give unto Caesar What Is Caesar's”: Evangelicals and Donald Trump**

- Trump's presidency was marked by a confusing relationship with the Bible. Christians formulated a variety of theological justifications for Trump – from direct prophecies, to comparisons with biblical kings who had moral failings but helped God's people, to claims that Trump's surprising win proved God's favor. Vaguely biblical language was constant, often divorced from larger biblical narratives or theological context.
- The days of the shining city on a hill were over. Trump was the first president since JFK not to use the language from the Sermon on the Mount, and his campaign was defended by Christians intent on sidelining Jesus's language. “We aren't electing a pastor” was a constant refrain of evangelical Trump supporters.
- The phrase “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's” has taken on a life of its own. This phrase seemingly requires no exegesis no context, no reasoned application. It is an easy way to slip in an important and contestable political theology without explaining or defending it. With the added context of imperial rule, of the conflict between different factions about the right response to this rule, and of the visual power of the image it is easier to see what Jesus was doing. While he might be differentiating civil and religious obligations, he is also highlighting their inherent confrontation. Paying the tab is giving Caesar his own coin back. But giving God what is God's, in light of Caesar's false claims to divinity, is to give God everything – including those things that Caesar might wrongfully require. Many biblical scholars describe this as a “nonviolent subversion of the oppressive power” that neither provokes open political rebellion nor acquiesces to Caesar's all-encompassing claims to sovereignty. As such, this story is less about justifying Caesar's authority and more about emphasizing God's claims over us. Compared with Caesar's, God's demand on humans is far greater, total, and prior – and it takes precedence whenever it conflicts with Caesar's claims. Nothing ultimately belongs to Caesar. But Jesus does not deny the

question entirely or imply that it is illegitimate to ask what might be owed to leaders. Rome's claims to authority are relativized, but not to the point of ignoring them. It is clear that Jesus is not telling his followers to forgo the political and economic world. While the “claims of Caesar are always subsumed under the fundamental claims of God,” loyalty to God does not require total disavowal of political authority. Loyalty to God is not compromised by submission to earthly authorities. We glimpse in this little phrase a biblical political theology, a picture of two kinds of rule. This interpretation has a similar early history, especially as early church leaders began to grapple with new problems of civil and ecclesial authority in a newly “Christian” empire.

- While Caesar has legitimate authority, when his authority conflicts with God's, there is no question about whose authority wins. In fact, in every account of this story in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus's announcement of the destruction of the temple and of the signs of the end times is right around the corner from this story. The coming kingdom of God emotes all earthly power. As many have said of New Testament political theology, “If Christ is Lord, then Caesar is not.”
- We should be concerned with understanding what Jesus actually meant, not merely picking up useful language for our predetermined political projects. We should also think more critically about the ways we have learned to think about our spiritual and political lives. We can get the nuance of this verse right while still operating in the world with an ingrained instinct that the “rules” in one realm of our lives are different from the “rules” in another. Our obligations to our families, churches, immediate communities, and broader political communities are different – but not unrelated. The standards we hold for a pastor and politician are different – but not unrelated. God's demand on our lives in a church per and a voting booth are different – but not unrelated.
- It is important for Christians not to merely ask: What does “Caesar” require of me, and what does God require of me? They must also ask: What might my ultimate obligation to God require me to demand of Caesar? What might be redemptive narrative in Scripture demand of my political life? How might the Holy Spirit be moving in our political world today?

## **Chapter 10 – Seek the Peace and Prosperity of the City: Jeremiah 29 and Political Theology**

- For those tired of culture war and a utilitarian politics that justify evil for some greater good, Jeremiah 29:4-7 is refreshing. Contemporary treatments of the passage abound. It is hard to find a book about culture or politics in recent years that does not at least mention the passage or use its language. It is especially appealing language when many Christians who once felt relatively comfortable in America have begun to feel marginalized or scorned in popular culture. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles have a much longer history, however, than our contemporary appropriations. This chapter describes the long journey of interpretation that this crucial passage has had. Jeremiah 29 has not only motivated particular policies but has been used to describe a whole theology of government and faithful Christian witness. Thinking about this passage across a much longer history than the American experiment can help settle us into this kind of thinking. Because Jeremiah 29 is used to describe a whole political theology, it is an important passage for highlighting the reality that all of our biblical interpretation is shaped by our political theology.
- Jeremiah 29 was important for the early church, primarily because of the work of theologian and bishop Augustine of Hippo and his City of God. This sprawling book covers theology, philosophy, political theory, history, and spiritual formation.
- Jumping forward through a thousand years of theology and politics, we come to John Calvin. The French reformer's context could not be more different from Augustine's in many ways: the once-fledgling church is now a wealthy and powerful institution rivaling the secular rulers it is intertwined with, the printing press has allowed theological treatises to spread through communities, and Calvin is preoccupied with the errors of the medieval church. Yet Augustine and Calvin share some foundational conditions that make Jeremiah 29 a captivating passage: they both lived in times of intense political and religious turmoil, they both spent their time combating theological errors, and they both had communities struggling to discern between earthly and eternal peace.
- Another just occurs from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century from the Reformation to modern theology, from the rule of empires to the rule of nation-states. We need a little less context, politically and historically, for this interpretation – because we share much of it. And unlike the former two interpretations of Jeremiah, rather



than looking at one person but rather at a tradition of thinking about theology and politics that some have called “exilic theology.” Just as Augustine's and Calvin's uses of Jeremiah 29 had their pitfalls and blind spots, the exilic theology tradition is often criticized as withdrawing from the broader life of the community. An overemphasis on the internal life of the church can discount the power of common grace and the work of God outside the church. In the aftermath of chaotic election seasons and discouraging periods of church conflict, a withdrawal option is appealing. Throughout church history our various perspectives, emphases, and contexts have given us a mix of good, bad, and in-between. Augustine got some of it right, certainly. Calvin had some good points, and contemporary theologians are not hopelessly lost either.

- We are shaped by the contours of American political history, just as Augustine and Calvin were shaped by their political contexts. Just as Calvin and Augustine and Brueggemann brought their theological systems or stories to the text, we do too. Just as their experiences with political power shaped how they applied a passage to their lives, our experiences will shape how we read. Hopefully we will never again say “This is just a plain reading of the text!” when it comes to faith and politics. This is not a reason for despair: while we are shaped by our political contexts, theological commitments, and personal histories, we can expect God to speak to us in the midst of them. This is, however, reason for humility and caution in our interpretations.
- The book of Jeremiah itself testifies to the difficulty we have interpreting Scripture for our political participation. More than the other prophetic books, Jeremiah is a book about conflict – not just military conflict but theological conflict as well. Jeremiah is not the only prophet in the book; there are false prophets who try to convince the people of God that the Babylonians won't capture them, that God would not punish them so severely, that this exile won't last. The drama of the book is a conflict over the nature of judgment, the meaning of the exile, and ultimately the word of God. Jeremiah was desperately concerned that the people of God would hear and do God's word. He knew that failure to hear and do God's word would lead the people of God into destruction. This was not a meaningless squabble or merely a hermeneutical dispute. This was a matter of life and death.
- We may look at our own recent history and decide that political power is too corrupting, navigating policy issues is too divisive, or making decisions between poor candidate choices is too exhausting. There is something appealing about reading Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles as an excuse for withdrawal from the messy political world. We focus on building faithful families and homes, pray for our leaders, and leave it at that. But regardless of our political context or theological commitments, Jeremiah's words find their place within a larger story of Scripture in which God's people are always oriented outward.
- From Abraham's call in Genesis 12:3 that “all people on earth will be blessed through you,” to Jeremiah's command to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city,” to the eschatological image of a redeemed city, God's concern has always been for all of creation. His people are given instructions toward the end, not toward self-preservation or isolation from the world. We should strive to build flourishing families and churches, but not at the expense of the commission God gave at the beginning and never rescinded: to care for all of creation (Gen 1:27-28).

## **Conclusion: The promise and Peril of Biblical References in Politics**

- One difficulty with examining biblical arguments in American political life is the blurry line between direct reverence and vague invocation of popular biblical language. Throughout American history, politicians, spiritual leaders, and government officials at all levels have seamlessly woven biblical language into their speeches and press releases. This is the promise and the peril of the Bible in political life. The language of Scripture has been watered down to the degree of political talking point, but its constant use also highlights a deep desire in people for transcendence, a universal moral order, and a part to play in a cosmic story.
- We are a Bible-haunted nation. How we respond is of crucial importance: Will we champion the unique power authority, and distinctive narrative of Scripture to motivate political work, or will we continue to halfheartedly cheer when a politician gives the Bible a PR boost. Regardless of what role we play in this conversation – pastor leading a congregation, family member navigating politics at the dinner table, or bible study member hashing out a difficult passage – we can learn from one crucial figure in Scripture to guide our work.
- The goal for us is that we would rightly receive and interpret the Bible, hearing it even when it speaks against us. We need prophetic Christians today – not people who enjoy feeling brash or bold or who joyfully enter into

conflict, but people who can carefully and courageously read God's Word and God's world. We need people who will guard the good deposit of Scripture and help us remember our own immediate history – the good and the bad. We need people who can understand the text well and understand their context well. We need people who can think well about ethics and politics and who have been spiritually formed in such a way that they can read the Word against their own interests. And we need Christians who can model Josiah's faithful response of hearing the word of the Lord against themselves. It is no accident that many of the examples of faithful biblical interpretation in this book are examples from the history of the Black church. White Christians in America have historically failed at hearing the word of the Lord against ourselves, especially when spoken by our Black brothers and sisters, as well as other believers of color.

- The Bible is itself the product of diversity and unity: one redemptive story given by God, but given to us through the various perspectives of a diverse cast of characters. It is also a book written very often from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized – God's people suffering under Pharaoh's or Babylon or Rome. Our interpretation of Scripture must be done in a way that models this diversity and recognizes this perspective. Many of us have learned that reading in community is better. We learn more about God when we gather together and listen to each other's questions and insights. But we also read better in the communion of the saints: drawing on the diverse perspectives of Christians throughout time and across geography, focusing especially on those voices that have gone unnoticed or ignored.
- The history of the Bible in American public life risks leaving us in a place of despair. But we are not without hope or help in our interpretive attempts. The Holy Spirit has not abandoned Christ's church, even when we are tempted to. Perhaps the most hopeful message for us today is the reminder that we will falter and fail in our interpretation, but God will not falter or fail us. Rather than throwing up our hands and abandoning the church or throwing ourselves into reviving the institution at any cost, we can share Bonhoeffer's faithful posture: “The church lives in the midst of dying solely because God calls it forth out of death into life, because God does the impossible against us and through us.” We can withstand hearing the word against us because we know that our witness does not stand or fall on our own strength – instead it relies on the mighty hand and outstretched arm of God. The church lives in the midst of dying, because God is faithful to his people.