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Engaging Democracy: Politics at the Foot of the Cross

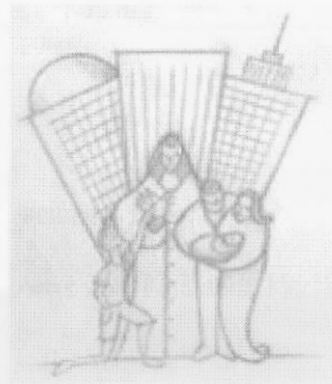
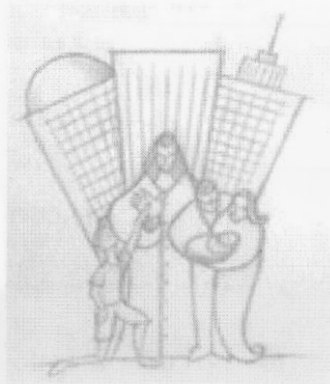
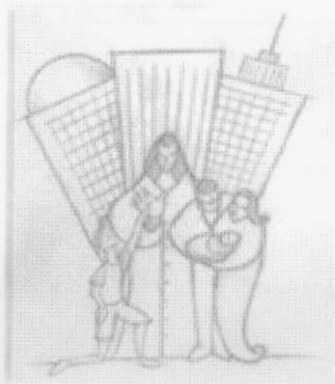
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ENGAGING DEMOCRACY: POLITICS AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

A TENURE PAPER IN
Political Science

Presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for tenure

by
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Only from the perspective of the cross, shattering as it was to Jesus' followers then as it should be now, can any view of politics... claim to be Christian.
--N.T. Wright (1990, 13)

Over the past decade or so, the discipline of political science rediscovered the religious factor in American politics: religion matters politically (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). Partisan identification and ideological leanings of course still matter, but recent scholarship—most notably by the so-called “gang of four”—shows unequivocally that an individual’s religious beliefs, behaviors, and belongings are equally important political indicators.¹ Without denying the importance of their path breaking contributions, however, Michael Le Roy (2001) nevertheless refers to these scholars (all of whom are Christians) as simply “Baptized Behaviorists.” His point, as he subsequently conveys, is that if Christian political scientists plan to do “more in the discipline than remind the profession that they must include ‘a religion variable’ in their analysis, then we must start to engage the theories that now dominate the discipline” (20). Towards that end, he believes theological commitments must be brought to bear on the theoretical underpinnings of political science.

Le Roy and other Christian scholars who wish to bring about “the re-enchantment of Political Science,” agree with George Marsden (1997) when he argues for “the opening of the academic mainstream to scholarship that relates one’s belief in God to what else one thinks about” (5). Undoubtedly, this form of inquiry or approach is likely to produce fresh new perspectives on a host of contemporary political issues. As far as the particular focus of this position paper, the disciplinary possibilities are nearly endless. From a prospective subfield list on American politics that includes—but is hardly limited to—the imperial

¹ Lyman Kellstedt of Wheaton College, until his recent retirement; James Guth of Furman University, John Green at the University of Akron, and Corwin Smidt of Calvin College are known as “gang of four” for their work in the subfield of religion and politics.

presidency, legislative realities, judicial usurpation, bureaucratic regulation, electoral reform, campaign financing, political party decline, civil liberties and rights, matters of church and state, the inventory of worthwhile subjects is extensive. That being said, the present effort trains its sights on the central idea of engaging democracy.

This choice is based in large part on a desire to sketch a broadly based, rather basic, argument regarding our civic responsibility as Christian citizens. The central question is not simply one regarding the extent or degree of individual political participation, but also involves the attractiveness of our democratic process. Is there any way in which democracy can be made more appealing? As such, this paper is making a preliminary, even normative, plea that is primarily concerned about the “approach” or “attitude” one adopts in attempting to be in but not of the political order or world of politics. In other words, it will investigate the foundational question of *how* we as Christian citizens should behave politically, the assumption being that a common denominator exists regardless of the kind or type of political engagement.² Some might object that the question of *why* Christians should participate in the political order in the first place demands attention. While civic duty is largely assumed here, the objection is addressed in time, albeit briefly.

The impetus behind these ponderings is found in response to N.T. Wright’s (1999) question concerning the “slant” of one’s discipline: “toward the will to power or the will to love?” (185). Not surprisingly, politics as well as its study often seems to focus on— even encourage—the former with little time or consideration given to the latter. Nevertheless, Wright encourages academics, among others, to imagine new possibilities and perspectives, political or otherwise. That, ultimately, is the goal of this paper. His advice also seems in keeping with Le Roy’s earlier admonition that the theological and theoretical must interact

² See Monsma’s (2001) three types of individual involvement— citizen participant as well as citizen and professional activists— is but one effort to categorize varying degrees of Christian public mindedness.

with one another if new and refreshing, not to mention Christian, perspectives ever hope to emerge. Consequently, as followers of Jesus we are called to take up the cross, which essentially means choosing the way of love. How might this strange idea of engaging democracy in such a manner—politics at the foot of the cross—challenge the current participatory practices, individually and collectively, of Christian citizens? It is to that question this paper is devoted, as the epigraph suggested, but first a quick preview.

This introduction is followed by a section that addresses an initial objection as well as makes some theoretical observations. Influenced as it is by both theology and theory, how might a new found appreciation for an individual's faith perspective, combined with the political reality of pluralism, guide this paper's thesis? A second section discusses the challenge of Jesus: who is he (the political Christ) for us (Christian citizens) today? In other words, what might we learn from reconsidering the life and times of Jesus; more specifically, what difference does his death on the cross make for the political order and those called to engage it? Section three considers the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and discusses his theology of a "weak" God—or, if you prefer, a theology of the cross—and its political implications. As citizens, we are members of the body politic, but Bonhoeffer reminds us of our membership in another body, the church. The fourth section speculates more directly on a politics of the cross and what that means for us living at the "end of history." Moreover, in what way are we on the road to Emmaus, much like disciples of the first century, and how should we respond to the imperial parallels of the twenty-first century? A final section concludes this paper by briefly considering a politics at the foot of the cross in conjunction with the "prophetic" role of a college professor. What might a new kind of Christian citizen look like and how should they engage democracy?

Addressing an Objection and Some Theoretical Observations

This paper proceeds under the assumption that Christians should participate in politics and as a result is primarily interested in exploring how they should go about doing so. Still, the question of why is too important not to consider, at least in passing. The proper relationship of Christians to the political order has obviously been asked and answered in a number of ways and by a variety of religious traditions.³ Despite their different stances toward the state, each religious tradition presumes a civic responsibility of some sort for their adherents. Still, in answering the “why” before considering the “how” of Christian political participation, it seems worthwhile to briefly consider a passage in Mark that Luis Lugo (1996) refers to “as the *locus classicus* of Jesus’ teaching on the state” (22). The irony of selecting the account of Caesar’s coin to make the case for Christian involvement in the democratic process is found in the fact this “text has often been used to support the thoroughly unchristian notion that political matters are of no concern to God, and its corollary, that they need not be of any concern to us” (2).

Moreover, this text is regularly read in such a way that the comparison Jesus draws between what one renders to Caesar and what one renders to God “is intended to highlight an inherent, irreconcilable tension between the two” (2). The frequent misuse and misreading of this story, Lugo contends, misses the two-fold purpose of Jesus’ admittedly cryptic answer: negating Caesar’s claim to absolute authority while concomitantly undercutting the logic that the claims of government are entirely illegitimate. The ingenuity of his response to the Pharisees is that he transforms the debate over taxes to a much more important matter involving the issue of authority and where it resides in the end. In other words, “Jesus affirms a proper sphere for Caesar (not apart from but under God), and that

³ Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Anabaptist, for instance, represent but four prominent religious traditions.

expresses God's goodness toward the creation, as expressed in the covenant with Noah" (22). It also supposes that far from being less than useful citizens given their ultimate allegiance to God, Christians should be counted among the state's best citizens potentially, as long as the state does not attempt to ascend to the place reserved for God in their lives.

Reflecting on the parallel gospel passage (Matthew 22:22ff), Le Roy (2001) states it "gives us only a glimpse as to what our relationship to political authority should be, but it is clear that the political order is somewhat distinct from, but still under, the dominion of God" (25). Recall the implicit allusion to this relationship to political authority in the brief discussion above regarding religious traditions. Obviously, in addition to its evangelical identity, Northwestern College is firmly rooted in a Reformed perspective. This worldview is captured nicely, if not simplistically, in the classic H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) depiction of "Christ transforming culture." Followers of Christ are encouraged to enter all areas of public life; Jesus is viewed as Lord of everything, even politics. As LeRoy, among others, observes, John Calvin goes so far as to say that government is in fact a gift from God and that as such a Christian could find no higher calling than to participate in the government, albeit one that is properly limited. As importantly, Calvin's own sophisticated understanding of politics serves as an enviable example, resulting as it did from his reliance not only on scripture, but also on reason and experience. This serves as a marvelous early model of critical thinking, if there ever was one.⁴

Thoughtful citizens, who as Christians wish to engage other citizens in the public square, would be wise to follow Calvin's balanced approach described above.⁵ As Le Roy

⁴ Northwestern's president, Bruce Murphy, makes just this point in his "President's Response to the NCA Task Forces" (see page five of the report).

⁵ Much as Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983) discovered to his utter surprise over two decades ago, it might be worthwhile to mention at this point the radical social roots of Calvinism. This contention is based on a view that sees sin manifested mainly in the oppressive social structures of a fallen society. Sin resides in the human

(2001) notes, “Christian political action that is ignorant of deeper knowledge of politics and process sorely damaged the standing of Christians in the public square” (32). True enough, there are numerous examples of Jesus’ followers entering the public square sadly uninformed and ill-equipped to participate in the political process and consequently harming the cause of Christ. That discussion, however, is for another day and a separate paper; at present, this one wishes to convey that as Christians engage democracy it is equally important—if not more so—that we are known by our love as well as by what we know. This admonition applies likewise to the public behavior of an individual and the actions of any organized interest or institution. The intention of subsequent sections is to suggest a “yardstick” or “plumb line” of sorts: a means to evaluate the cause one might get behind; the public policy one should support; or the candidate for which one plans to cast a ballot.

On a slightly different, though related, note, pluralism provides a constructive conceptual explanation for how the governed attempt to influence their government. As opposed to individuals or institutions, organized interests (i.e., interest groups) lie at the heart of pluralism. While all three influence one another inevitably, a pluralist perspective initially imagined the political system in terms of setting one faction against another, much as James Madison envisioned in the *Federalist*, No. 10. From this vantage point, all politics is basically understood in terms of group conflict (Bentley 1908; Truman 1951). Given the well established and inherent bias of the interest group universe, the pluralist ideal remains as yet unrealized. Still, the proliferation of organized interests over the past three decades leads James Q. Wilson (1995) to claim that the “pluralism that once was a distant promise is now a

heart, of course, but is not merely found there. As former colleague Ronald Wells (2004) notes, “for Wolterstorff the first impetus of Calvinism is not directed inward but outward, not to the individual’s soul but to the social world. Such piety is characterized by obedience motivated by gratitude and expressed in vocation” (7). Seen in this light, civic responsibility broadens considerably and affords individual Christian citizens a multitude of opportunities for fulfilling their obligation to faithfully serve.

baffling reality” (xxii). David Truman’s (1951) “wave” theory depicted group activity as spontaneous, occurring naturally in a competitive environment. As he understood it, two kinds of upheaval perpetuated this view of the political process: the public’s reaction to an increasingly complex society and cataclysmic events. Consequently, mobilization and counter-mobilization are basically engendered by periodic disturbances; those who organize in response to someone or something do so in an effort to restore a sense of equilibrium.

In general, pluralists maintained a relatively optimistic outlook; some felt that even non-participants were represented, albeit indirectly, in the arena of group conflict (Dahl 1961). Critics of pluralist orthodoxy, however, were less sanguine in assessing matters since for them interest organization led to the mobilization of bias. While E.E. Schattschneider’s (1960) view, for instance, may have assumed a less conspiratorial tone than that of several contemporaries (e.g., Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967), he nonetheless observed rather poetically that the “heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (35). Others found evidence of representation that also exerted reasonable political influence difficult to come by: organized interests were merely “service bureaus” (Bauer, Pool, and Dexter 1963). Still, the fatal blow for pluralism apparently came from what became known as the collective action problem. Mancur Olson’s (1965) challenge stemmed from questioning the pluralist assumption regarding group formation. In his opinion, it was not natural or rational for individuals to join a group; collective goods created “free-riders.” As a result, group mobilization proceeded along one of two paths: employment of coercion or the use of selective incentives.

In taking Olson’s thesis to task over the years, it is clear that though *The Logic of Collective Action* explains why groups do not spontaneously form, he failed to account for the empirical reality of escalating associational activity. Simply put, his notion of rationality

proved too limited. To begin with, a view taken solely from the vantage point of the organization *depreciates the value of an individual's perspective* (a viewpoint, given faith's potential influence, of importance to this paper). Moreover, he relied too heavily on an economic or material assumption. As opposed to social pressure or selective benefits, Wilson (1995) suggests a third solution to the collective action paradox: "appeals to purposes." Underlying this view is a belief that people define self-interest differently or less narrowly than Olson did.⁶ It seems reasonable to think that this kind of theoretical adjustment, while clearly a move in the right direction away from purely rational choice models, could be impacted even further by the incorporation of certain theological insights. Christian citizens who engage the democratic process, of course, are self-interested actors too; in what way might their participation be affected if as followers of Jesus they reconsider the challenge he presents for them today? Invariably this should influence not only *how* they conduct themselves in the political order, but *why* they do so in the first place.

Theological Considerations and the Challenge of Jesus

This normative concern that is central to my discipline—engaged citizens—begins to find new meaning in the challenge of Jesus. In addressing the issue of civic responsibility, students must rediscover who Jesus was and is for us today (Wright 1999). Societal change, of course, often has either a conservative or progressive cast to it. That evangelical

⁶This rationale serves as the basis of incentive theory. Namely, the employment of differing incentives—material or otherwise—should affect the goals and tactics of the organizations making use of them. In the wake of Olson's work, a cottage industry quickly grew up around incentive theory with scholarly interest emerging over the role of incentives, not to mention their various types. While Olson's perspective predominately emphasized those of an economic or material nature, Clark and Wilson (1961) believed that in addition to tangible goods, individuals were also motivated to join a group for solidary and purposive reasons. The former refers to social (i.e., intangible) benefits. The latter appeals instead to the satisfaction derived from the pursuit of group goals. Indeed, a host of incentives beyond rationality have been identified since Olson first challenged the conventional wisdom of pluralism. The following list, though far from exhaustive, hints at the breadth of potential incentives at the disposal of group organizers: efficacy, duty, and morality (Hardin 1982); fairness (Goodwin and Mitchell 1982); cooperation (Axelrod 1984).

Christians are typically seen as change agents of the former persuasion is not surprising. Still, American evangelicalism is far from monolithic. A fair number of evangelicals, albeit a distinct minority, are clearly located on the left of the religious subculture. Their faith, while clearly orthodox, tends to inform their politics in a more progressive fashion. Regardless of their political inclination, most evangelicals generally find themselves telling essentially the same “story” at the start of the twenty-century.

As Brian McLaren (2001), observes “there are two dominant stories alive in our culture today” (86).⁷ The first views human existence primarily in terms of random chance and purposelessness, while the second one envisions a Creator with a design who cares deeply for all of humanity. Evangelicals overwhelmingly adopt the latter one as their own. Unfortunately, in the on-going “culture wars” social conservatives, or fundamentalists— as exemplified first by the Moral Majority and, then, more recently the Christian Coalition— are associated with right-wing, partisan politics. This is regrettable; though all fundamentalists are evangelicals, not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. According to Marsden (1991), “a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something” (1). This stems largely from a constant concern over what is viewed as the various societal signs marking the end of a biblically based American culture.⁸ Mary Rose O’Reilley (1999) offers all who are involved in effecting cultural transformation, fundamentalist or otherwise, sage counsel: “if the goal is to change society... we do not have to get angry to do it” (36).

The example of Jesus is, as always, instructive. Living amidst the fervor and fanaticism of nationalist revolution that was early first century Palestine, Christ chose another way. Moreover, as Wright (1999) contends “Jesus saw as a pagan corruption *the very*

⁷ Worldwide, McLaren claims there are as many as four or five competing stories.

⁸ Taking prayer out of the public schools, “abortion on demand,” and gay marriage are but three examples that are commonly cited many evangelicals.

desire to fight paganism itself" (89, italicized in the original). Popular, evangelical, cultural critic Philip Yancey suggests, that the principal target for much of Jesus criticism was the religious community of his day.⁹ This internal, rather than external, focus seems every bit as sound a strategy today as it was two thousand years ago. To the contrary, though, many of Christ's contemporary ambassadors have apparently failed to follow his lead and done just the opposite. Our goal, as captured in the title of a recent Tony Campolo (1997) book, should be one of "following Jesus without embarrassing God." There he argues "to be followers of Christ requires that we imagine what Jesus would think and do in our own given situations," political or otherwise (6). For us to do so, first requires an unblinking examination of the attitudes and actions of the historical Jesus and what this, in turn, means for our own religious as well as political beliefs and behaviors.

It is interesting to ask as Alan Storkey (1999) does: "How is it that the political can be edited out of the gospel" (63)? Selective reading and apolitical interpretations of the past have left the mistaken impression that the Bible has little to say about the matter. Political aspects or dimensions of the biblical text are seldom treated as such, but are sadly relegated to a role of providing only context for the more important religious message. One result, according to Richard Horsley (2002), is a depoliticized Jesus. Citing several interrelated contributing factors, he believes "the net effect... is to reduce Jesus to a religious teacher who uttered isolated sayings and parables relevant only to individual persons" (7). It is hard to think that Jesus was unaware of what was going on around him or that what he said or did had little political significance. Storkey (1999) observes that at the time Jesus lived "hatred of Rome and its allies burned deep in Judea and Galilee" (87). And yet Christ's message could not have been clearer—

⁹ He especially makes this point in his two books *The Jesus I Never Knew* (1995) and *What's So Amazing About Grace* (1997).

The kingdom, the rule, the government of God is on God's terms. You love enemies. You forgive. You fulfill the law. You seek justice and righteousness for others. You are meek, rather than self-assertive. You go the second mile. You forgive debts. This is God's way. Follow it or leave it. The government of God has come among you. It is more powerful than Herod Antipas. *What are you going to do with it?* (89, italics mine)

It almost goes without saying, but this is a kind of politics that is as engaging as it is unfathomable. Still, the parting question quoted and italicized just above, is as applicable today as ever.

What might we learning from reconsidering the praxis of Jesus? Richard Bauckham (1989) claims that "the key to the way Jesus actualized God's rule is his loving identification with people" (143). While this solidarity knew no limits, Christ did not identify with all people in the same way. Nor did he do so with them solely as individuals: "he also appreciated the extent to which they belonged to specific social groups" (145). Jesus possessed a special concern for the marginalized of society (i.e., those who experienced relative exclusion from the mainstream, whether socially, economically or religiously). The epitome of this loving identification is found, not surprisingly, in the cross of Jesus. A crucified Christ is important not the least because it identified him with other victims who suffered at the hands of a political system.¹⁰ As Bauckham reminds us, "we must not give his death a meaning which is indifferent to the processes and structures by which some human beings make victims of others... [and] any ideology which encourages us to ignore or to minimize the sufferings of some in the interests of others is forbidden us by the cross" (149). What makes this all the more amazing is that this is a fate that Jesus could have avoided, but more on that shortly.

¹⁰ As Bauckham (1989) notes, "crucifixion was a common fate in the ancient world" (147). It is interesting to realize that the gospel narratives are some of the longest and most detailed accounts of such events. Why has the historical record generally neglect this subject? For starters, it was a fairly typically fate, but as Bauckham conveys, these cruel and torturous means clearly were at odds with the ends or image of a civilized society. Besides, as Horsley (2002) points out, crucified people were those who did not matter (i.e., from the lower classes, foreigners, and slaves). It is why he feels "given that crucifixion was used mainly for slaves and rebels among subject peoples, the Romans must have understood Jesus to be an insurrectionary of some sort" (131).

The cross, then, interrupts and reinterprets the hope of the resurrection. Brian Walsh (1994) points out that “biblically, there is no resurrection without a cross. Moreover, resurrection life is still a matter of bearing a cross...” (10). Wright (1999), in his consideration of the crucified Messiah, similarly focuses on how we need to be cross-bearers. What does being a cross-bearer look like in the area of politics? How do we bring the cross to bear on politics? What might a politics of the cross involve? In other words, “our task is to discover, in practice, what the equivalent of the resurrection might be within our culture and for our times,” keeping in mind that the answer is already found in “the love of God, which goes through death and out the other side” (170). It is to one such prescient attempt to follow Jesus, while engaging the political order no less, which this paper now turns.

Bonhoeffer’s Theology of a “weak” God and its Political Implications

Our vocation as members of his body—the church—is, as Wright (1999) says “... to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel” (181). How can we do this? Only by becoming a reflection of God’s creative and redemptive love is such a challenge even possible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer served as one such agent of grace. A young German pastor and promising theologian when Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer became initially an outspoken voice in the Confessing Church and later an active member in the resistance movement before his eventual death as a martyr in April of 1945.¹¹ This section of the paper relies almost exclusively on Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1971) in investigating notions of a

¹¹ The Confessing Church was composed of a group of pastors/congregations who opposed the “nazification” of the German Lutheran Church. Given Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler, Bethge (1975) claims “the image of a saintly martyr which had been cultivated for [many] years now no longer fits” (13). Still other images persist. The affinity with which Bonhoeffer is embraced by evangelicals is interesting. On the one hand, it is not surprising given the content of his more traditional and most popular theological writings among evangelicals—*Cost of Discipleship* (1963) and *Life Together* (1954). On the other hand, the rather controversial words he penned in prison—*Letters and Papers from Prison*—if read by more evangelicals would likely lead to either a reassessment, even refutation, of Bonhoeffer or, in a more hopeful vein, a brand new understanding of who God is as reveal in Jesus Christ.

“weak” God and its political implications for followers of Jesus. The difficulty in understanding Bonhoeffer is compounded, of course, by the nature of his prison writings; their less than fully developed final form invite greater interpretation. It is easy to see, then, how Bonhoeffer could be used, exploited or misapplied over the years. Nevertheless, his theological insights, though potentially troubling, deserve attention because they help to answer the question: who is Jesus Christ for us today?

The problem with religious people, Bonhoeffer claims, is that they “speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail” (281). Invoking God as the *deus ex machina* becomes problematic as humans continue to push out even further the boundaries of knowledge and understanding. A God who above all addresses the unknown and unanswerable only has “space” in this world to lose. As the *deus ex machina*, God becomes less of a necessity, even superfluous. That is why, for Bonhoeffer, God must be recognized in this world and “the ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the center of life, and he did not ‘come’ to answer our unsolved problems” (312). In Larry Rasmussen’s (1990) opinion, Bonhoeffer feels that “the disabling God of religion must go... [a]nd it is precisely ‘with’ and ‘before’ the God seen in Jesus that we learn to live ‘without’ the God of religion” (125). Therefore, since the traditional, “working hypothesis” of God has been rendered untenable due to man’s ability to live without this God-of-the-gaps, a new approach or conception of God becomes necessary and must be presented in order to reconcile a world-come-of-age with God.

Bonhoeffer (1971) believes, it would seem, that God wishes to render us strong and responsible in this world. He thus writes that God—

... is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 make is quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue

of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering... the world's coming of age... which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness (360-1).

As a result, God can no longer remain the “working hypothesis” by which human beings understand their world; no longer can they use God as a “stop-gap” when their knowledge comes to an end. Bonhoeffer was helped considerably in this effort to reorient our concept of God by his understanding of the Old Testament. Redemption in the Old Testament is concerned with events “this side of death” (336). Reinterpreting the New Testament in light of the Old Testament’s “this-worldly” viewpoint (particularly the work and person of Jesus Christ), helped to avoid the all too common misunderstanding, distortion, and spiritualization of the former. It is important to recall that Bonhoeffer wanted to live “unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, success and failures, experiences and perplexities... taking seriously not [his] own sufferings, but those of God in this world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane” (370). That is the essence of faith and “it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith” (369).

A transformation, of sorts, results and a different kind of “power” is obtained through suffering and identifying with those who are powerless in this world. Rasmussen (1990) claims that followers of Jesus are called to imitate his example of “siding with the defenseless, the poor, the weak, the prosecuted and the persecuted...” (44). A “weak” God, through the person of Jesus, presumably inspires acts of compassion among those who call Christ Lord. In Bonhoeffer’s words, “God lets himself be pushed out of this world on to the cross” (1971, 360). If God is all-powerful, as the God of religion has traditionally been understood, followers of Jesus are less likely to think they should be held responsible for what happens in this world. Their chief concern becomes instead personal salvation and life beyond the pain of this broken world. Bonhoeffer, of course, welcomed the world’s

“coming of age.” Reconciling this view, then, with his radically Christocentric perspective resulted in Bonhoeffer placing an even stronger emphasis on a theology of the cross (i.e., a “weak” God). As Rasmussen (1990) describes it, Bonhoeffer’s nascent theological view claimed “that God happens for us in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth; that everything we know of God and God’s purposes, or of ours and the world’s nature and destiny, is buried in the details and drama of that life, death, and resurrection...” (155).

Bonhoeffer’s best friend and key correspondent for many of the prison letters, Eberhard Bethge (1970), feels there is both prospect and paradox found in the dialectic between a world-come-of-age and a theology of the cross. On the one hand, prospect allows Bonhoeffer (1971) to affirm the world’s “self-assurance” that resulted from the increasing secularization and modernity of society. While acknowledging that “Christian apologetics has taken the most varied forms of opposition to this self-assurance,” he considers these efforts pointless, ignoble, and unchristian (326).¹² Bonhoeffer attempts to adjust our thinking by applauding this world-come-of-age, but not because such a world is a better place in and of itself. In actuality, a world dominated by the secular is, indeed, godless, but it nevertheless brings into clearer focus the true nature of God in this world: one who is “weak.” On the other hand, paradox results from his theology of the cross confronting a “self-assured” world. It does so, as Bethge (1970) observes, by challenging the “... urge of mankind to glorify, deify, or demonize its progress...” (773). Again, by revealing the true God in Jesus, this world’s “coming of age” can now be claimed by Christ. Rather than being against the world, God can now be for the world: both as its Lord and savior.

The objection to a “weak” God, besides initially offending many, is summed up as follows: why would anyone feel obliged to serve such a God? The short answer, of course,

¹² Not unlike Wright’s (1999) earlier contention that Jesus viewed such opposition to paganism as its own form of or variation on pagan corruption (see page ten of this paper).

is they would not. It almost goes without saying that a “weak” God is going to evoke a more genuine human response; ulterior motives are no longer salient. Moreover, no one must respond out of a sense of duty or fear in order to satisfy or appease an all-powerful God. Bethge captures the essence of the Christian experience with a “weak” God when he writes, “... man does not delegate himself to an almighty God, but God in weakness delegates himself to man” (148). In his opinion, the choice, now more than ever, is ours to make. While clearly at odds with traditional Reformed notions of providence, this seems in keeping with the New Testament hope that disciples of Jesus would live as “Christ’s Ambassadors” with his love compelling them towards an altruism and selflessness that mystically possesses a “strength” all its own. Love like this captivates and empowers. This was Bonhoeffer’s (1971) experience and that is why he wrote “if we are to learn what God promises and fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus” (391). It follows, then, that we can represent the living, albeit “weak,” God by being caught up in the way of Jesus.

Religion has for far too long been identified with inwardness and personal piety, that is, a retreat from this world. If Bonhoeffer is right in his estimation that religion was growing irrelevant in a world-come-of-age that is not to say it contained no truth, even if it was poorly communicated. The German church, in Bonhoeffer’s day, was preoccupied with self-preservation and thus rendered itself incapable for the task of reconciliation and redemption. Still, Bethge (1975) seems correct in saying that Bonhoeffer argued not for a church-less Christianity, but rather a religionless Christianity: the church needed only to be transformed (152). It was the church’s conception of God—the *deus ex machina*—that had marginalized its impact and significance in this world. A so-called religionless Christianity serves simply to point to Bonhoeffer’s ultimate concern: who is Jesus Christ for us today?

The beauty of this question is found in its timelessness. It is no less relevant today that it was when Bonhoeffer asked it over half-a-century ago.

“The church is only the church when it exists for others,” wrote Bonhoeffer (1971, 382). This naturally followed from his understanding that our relationship with a “weak” God was “a new life in ‘existence for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus” (381). Since the church is the “body of Christ,” followers of Jesus who live fully in this world and share in its sufferings, like he did, will move the church out of its privatized world into a more socially and politically relevant one. This identifying with Christ, being on the side of those victimized by the powers and principalities of the world, is undoubtedly not a popular calling. Still, for that very reason, those who serve a “weak” God by following the example of Jesus need to be unquestionably devoted to such a vocation. In a way, they must be willing to accept the demands of a “costly” as opposed to “cheap” grace. Why else live for Jesus?

Taking this kind of responsible— and inevitably political— action in this world would turn Christianity on its head, but more on that later. For now, suffice it to say that it seems Bonhoeffer’s purpose in dispatching the “religion of Christianity” was so that in its place a more authentic expression of God in Jesus Christ would emerge. Fittingly, he wrote that “it was not the religious act that makes a Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in secular life” (361). In the end, Bethge (1975) believes Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* must be viewed as an attempt to share his personal experience as a pattern, as a new way of being a new kind of Christian. Thoroughly engaged in the political order of his day, Bonhoeffer lived out the theology of a “weak” God, however imperfectly. It would seem we are called to do likewise.

The End of History, the Road to Emmaus, and American Empire

What might a politics at the foot of the cross look like today? How should it encourage Christian citizens to engage democracy? In what way would it make democracy more engaging? To being such speculation, it is helpful to accurately assess the times in which one lives. We should ask, as Brian Walsh (1994) does, “where are we in our cultural history” (35)? One possibility is that we are at the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama (1989) famously declared over a decade ago; namely, that the triumph of Western liberal democracy has ushered in a (nearly) universal final form of human government. Though he disagrees with Fukuyama’s diagnosis, even Walsh says “it seems... we are coming to the end of something—the end of a cultural epoch, the end of modernity, the end of secular imagination. This ending will not be easy. Our modern culture will not grow old gracefully and die” (41). In contrast, Walsh offers up the perspective of an Old Testament figure—

Jeremiah is a prophet of the end of history. But unlike Fukuyama history does not end because it has come to its fulfillment or its completion. Rather, history ends when the symbolic world, or cultural myth, disintegrates... When history ends—whether it be the destruction of the Jewish covenantal world of monarchy and temple in 587, or the present dismantling of the Enlightenment dream of progress in an ever expanding consumer society—a culture experiences a terrifying sense of loss of control (68-9).

Endings are typically viewed as a death of sorts and are accompanied by a period of mourning or grief; often denial. The analogies between Jeremiah’s time and our own are more stunning than they are a stretch. Many Christians have not just rejected post-modernity, but have refuted it vigorously. While not explicitly encouraging efforts that wish to craft a Christian worldview from within post-modernity, neither does Wright (1999) see good reasons for us to cling to various modernist versions of Christianity. He argues that “we should not be frightened of the postmodern critique” (154). Besides, the biblical view of history has a decidedly different take on endings, as Walsh (1994) points out. The bible

quite often offers radical reversals instead: supposed endings subsequently emerge as new beginnings.

Consider the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.¹³ Like so many Jews of that day, they had a particular ending in mind that presumed too much; Wright (1999) observes that “the crucifixion of Jesus was therefore the complete and final devastation of their hopes” (160). But they had been telling, not to mention living, the wrong story. Jesus tells the story differently: Israel would not master its enemies but would be vindicated through its suffering servant. Adhering to the deeply-rooted tradition in Judaism known as the “critique from within,” Jesus made use of decidedly well-known themes of his day, albeit redirecting prophecies of judgment and vindication in profoundly new ways. He refused to tell the customary tale exonerating the nation of Israel; destruction was now destined for Jerusalem and vindication set aside only for Jesus and his disciples.¹⁴ In criticizing his contemporaries, Jesus was, in effect, “announcing the kingdom of God—not the revolutionary message of the hardliners but the doubly revolutionary message of a kingdom that would overturn all other agendas, including the revolutionary one” (53).

The coming of the kingdom put forward a challenge, questioning as it did a long-held assumptions regarding the nation’s fate. The clash between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries was over competing political agendas which were by-products of alternative eschatological beliefs and expectations. In essence, as Wright reminds us, “Jesus was summoning his hearers to a different way of being Israel” (81). Contemporary connections appear in the challenge Wright offers us today: “What Jesus was for Israel, the church must now be for the world” (53). Interestingly, if the death of modernity is indeed precipitated by

¹³ Luke 24:13-35.

¹⁴ Interestingly, many of the biblical predictions allegedly announcing the end of the world are instead a particular genre of writing—apocalyptic language—that more likely denotes major political and social upheaval of that day. See Mark 13, Matthew 24 and Luke 21 as examples.

a postmodern age, many Christians may feel a bit like those two fellows on the road to Emmaus, especially if they fail to appreciate “part of the point of postmodernity under the strange providence of God is to preach the Fall to arrogant modernity” (183). Early Christianity was concomitantly a counter-Temple as well as a counter-Empire movement. Moreover, as evidence of the kingdom of God, it was “... not about a private existentialist or Gnostic experience but about public events” (132).

As citizens of the United States—a *Pax Americana* according to some— what might we learn from Jesus’ own encounter with empire? Again, “if we are to follow Jesus Christ we need to know more about the Jesus Christ we are following” (53); by studying his vocational awareness Wright believes “we can examine [Jesus’] actions and sayings and can work back with a fair degree of certainty to... aims and intentions” (75). As discussed above, in ushering in the kingdom of God, Jesus wanted Israel, in its struggle with Rome, to serve as an example for the rest of the world. The most astonishing thing, however, was that this would not be accomplished militarily or violently, but instead by adopting the audacious attitude of turning the other cheek and going the second mile; “at the heart of Jesus’ subversive agenda was the call to his followers to take up the cross and follow him” (85).

Richard Horsley (2002), in his attempt to shed light “on how Jesus responded to the Roman imperial order, or from the point of view of his Galilean and Judean contemporaries, the disorder that Roman imperialism meant for their lives,” argues that “far from being reducible to religion, the immediate Palestinian context of Jesus’ mission was highly politicized, filled with periodic popular unrest and protests, movement, and outright revolts against the imperial order that had been imposed by the Romans” (13).¹⁵ While some will

¹⁵ As Horsley conveys, “the new world order established first by Pompey’s victories in the east and then consolidated by Augustus brought a prolonged period of peace and prosperity for the already ‘civilized’ Roman and Greek areas of the empire. The *Pax Romana* enabled the Romans to extract goods from the peoples they

undoubtedly take issue with Horsley's willingness to place Jesus in the same company as other resistance leaders of his day without more explicitly noting the unique vocation of Christ, the fact remains that Jesus offered an inspiring alternative to the Roman imperial order.¹⁶ As Horsley conveys, "in his offering the kingdom of God to the poor, hungry, and despairing people, Jesus instilled hope in a seemingly hopeless situation" (126). Strikingly reminiscent of Bonhoeffer's view, as detailed in the previous section of this paper, Horsley goes even further when he writes—

Appealing to and adapting these traditional values and principles of just and cooperative political-economic relations, Jesus called people to take control of their lives in a social revolution. Because God was acting on their behalf, in judgment and deliverance, they could now take action themselves to check divisive behavior and to (re)establish cooperation (127)

This begins to suggest the broad outline that might frame the kind of cross-bearing we should be about. Horsley, of course, believes that "...it was precisely in those circumstances of poverty and powerlessness that Jesus and his followers found it essential to struggle to practice those values and principles of justice, cooperation, and solidarity" (128). Despite the empire seemingly having the last word in this matter with its eventual crucifixion of Jesus, Christ's band of followers not only expanded significantly, they did so with considerable assurance and conviction. Far from an ending, then, this radical reversal simply marked the birth of a new and profound beginning. Even Horsley appears to acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ more straightforwardly, when he notes that "Jesus' death and

had subjected, in the form of tribute, in order both to support their military forces and to pacify the Roman masses with 'bread and circus'" (34). Moreover, and as importantly, "to understand how the Roman imperial order worked in the rest of the empire, including the less 'civilized' subject peoples of the Middle East, we must explore other dimensions of Roman imperialism. The more we move into the less 'civilized' areas of the empire, the more we find that what was... *order* for the imperial metropolis and the urbanized peoples, especially the wealthy elites, meant disruption and *disorder* for more recently subjected peoples" (25).

¹⁶ Jesus, in fact, offered much more than just an alternative way of life to that experienced by most Jews under the Roman Empire. Horsley contends "much of Paul's terminology is borrowed from and turned back against imperial discourse" (133), and that "by applying this key imperial language [i.e., gospel, savior, salvation, faith, lord, etc] to Jesus Christ, Paul was making him into the alternative or real emperor of the world, the head of an anti-imperial international alternative society" (134). In other words, what is known as the church or body of Christ.

resurrection in fact had become the turning point in history” (133). The empire, however, may indeed have had the last word after all. The “anti-imperial international alternative society,” what Jesus first announced as the kingdom of God or what found expression in the church, or body of Christ, eventually took on the more familiar orthodox form of Christianity. In Horsley’s view, “after generations of increasing accommodation to the imperial order, the churches were finally recognized as the official, established religion of the Roman Empire by the emperor Constantine” (135).

While even a so-called *Pax Americana* can hardly be equated to the Roman Empire, there are enough parallels worth pondering momentarily. Besides, the current state of the world and our standing in it raise numerous questions, not the least of which is: why do they hate us?¹⁷ The United States—founded as it was on dueling identities—sought to establish a new and improved form of republican virtue as well as be a biblical people. Was it the new Rome or the new Israel? Either way, the United States began building its own empire of sorts. According to Horsley, “Roman ‘globalization’ was political. Military conquest made possible economic exploitation that was low-level by modern standards. Modern American imperial power is primarily economic, structured by the capitalistic system that has long since transcended American national borders and become global” (144). The imposition of Western ideals and ideas has obviously met with, even generated its own, resistance.

It should be noted that the subject of empire is one, albeit of many, political themes found in the Old Testament too. As Storkey (1999) points out, the Bible contains “in excess of 150 chapters of text which is substantially involved with the subject of empire” (85). Moreover, the failure of many Christian citizens in the developed world to appreciate this political dimension of God’s word is likely due to the fact that “empires are usually under

¹⁷ The question, of course, can be asked both about the United States as well as by those of us who are citizens of this nation. The former perspective is less readily recognized, not surprisingly.

God's judgment, and that liberation of people from oppressive rule and from slavery is the dominant message of these chapters. *When the judgment is against us, we prefer not to hear*" (86, italics mine)? In challenging the idolatry of American empire, it may be worth asking whose role is it to redeem the world: the church or the state? Not a few Americans, many evangelicals included, seem to think this role is reserved for the world's sole remaining superpower as opposed to God's church universal.¹⁸ It is likely wise to remember Horsley's (2002) concluding caveat (not unlike Storkey's above): "people whose life circumstances are more analogous to the ancient Roman patricians or the Roman plebs who enjoyed the 'bread and circus' lifestyle... may understandably find it difficult to 'relate' directly to Jesus' pronouncements and practices" (149).

Politics at the Foot of the Cross and "prophetic" College Professors

What are the political implications of Jesus and the gospels for those of us who are members of the kingdom of God as well as citizens of the United States? If, as Wright (1999) claims, "the cross is the surest, truest and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God" (94), then we must bring the cross to bear on politics. Christianity, according to Walsh (1994), must reassert itself as a subversive cultural movement.¹⁹ Ours is a prophetic witness ultimately, because "the prophet brings to public expression the pain of the community that numbness covers up" (37). The proper

¹⁸ George W. Bush's most recent state of the union address, which proclaimed that the United States is a light for the world as well as Ronald Reagan's memorial service this past summer that recalled his affinity for depicting America as a Shining City on a Hill, are but two examples worth citing. Moreover, it seems worthwhile to consider Horsley's (2002) contention that "as this strand of the United State's identity became intertwined with the United States as the new Rome—like the old Rome, bringing salvation and civilization to the world it conquered—it injected an intense religious quality into American 'manifest destiny'" (148) alongside Shank's (2003) portrayal of the so-called "Project of the New American Century" and its impact on contemporary U.S. foreign policy.

¹⁹ Walsh urges us to challenge the "myth of progress" whether it is in the promise of science, technology or economics and contend with the reigning principalities and power of our day.

response—the attitude and approach with which we engage democracy—to a culture in decline (whether one labels it post-Christian or postmodern matters little) “is not angry denunciation, but public lament and mourning” (44). In other words, passion and tears, namely, a willingness to feel, suffer, and care for those who are the “least of these.” Surely that will involve action on behalf of those we find living among us as well as for those that live far beyond our borders. Either way, they should be viewed as our neighbors.

“The question we must face in our political lives,” Walsh encourages us to ask, “is whether we can imagine a politics of justice and compassion in place of the present politics of oppression and economic idolatry” (46). While imagining such a possibility is not necessarily easy, establishing the actual image is far more difficult. Still, Wright (1999) is correct when he observes “once we have glimpsed the true portrait of God, the onus is on us to reflect it: to reflect it as a community, to reflect it as individuals” (124).²⁰ My hope is that this paper, in some small way and however imperfectly, conveys the importance of political participation serving as a potential means of reflected glory. Oddly enough, this reminds me why I became a teacher in the first place and a political scientist in particular.

I see being a professor as a “prophetic vocation,” in part. While others wisely counsel against the dangers of naïve idealism, I still contend that my calling is one that involves a measure of normative concern. It was nearly a decade ago, but I recall reading a passage from Hunter’s (1987) *Evangelicalism: the Coming Generation* that resonates with me to this day. In his chapter on “Modernity and the Reconstruction of Tradition,” Hunter examines the role of higher education in this process captured by that section’s title. As he argues, “education—even evangelical education—weakens the tenacity with which

²⁰ Insightfully, Walsh also notes that “... we produce society and it produces us” (65). The danger of going it alone, of course, is that as we work our way within the political order or system, the system or political order works its way within us. Hence, the value of community and the accountability it potentially affords the individual.

evangelicals hold on to traditional cultural codes” (173). The marginal notes in my copy of Hunter’s text ask: is this bad? Then, as now, I think the answer is no, not necessarily.

Hunter cites three factors in particular that have contributed to this effect. For our purposes here, however, I will focus exclusively on only one of them: college faculty.²¹ His findings demonstrate that faculty members at institutions of Christian higher education are “less committed to the theological and cultural traditions of the evangelical heritage than their students;” furthermore, Hunter speculates that, “it is difficult to imagine this fact *not* having a profound effect on the world view of students” (175). Not surprisingly, many members of the evangelical academy see this—debunking religious dogmatism or moral parochialism—as a professional objective. A professor’s role, in other words, is one of loosening the “ties that bind.” In place of dogmatic parochialism many wish to see emerge in their students a more salient faith. I heartily agree. As one instructor in Hunter’s study conveyed, “what [some] may call ‘contamination’ or ‘erosion,’ I call ‘success’” (176).

While Hunter interprets these findings in considerably more dire terms than I would, he claims contemporary Christian higher education produces unintended consequences that undermine its primary purpose. In his estimation, many graduates of institutions like Northwestern are, while not disaffected from their faith, less certain of those traditional attachments than when they first matriculated. I agree. But in my view, Hunter has misread the evidence, or, at a minimum, its effect.²² Two student perspectives he shares serve as perfect examples of what I and the faculty member above would likely consider “success” stories. For instance, one student acknowledged that “college encouraged me to question

²¹ The other two factors Hunter identifies are the nature of higher education itself and the social context in which college campuses are found.

²² Penning and Smidt (2002) present evidence to counter many of Hunter’s contentions and their findings might suggest that the “coming evangelical generation” does not have as many examples of “success” stories as some would hope or claim. Their study may be interpreted, in part, as an indictment on the “critical thinking” that is going on at Christian liberal arts colleges today as opposed to two decades ago, though that was not the intention of their efforts.

and evaluate my beliefs, and as a result, they have changed since I've been here. I have become less dogmatic..." Likewise, another admitted, "I don't think my faith is weaker now, but it is just a little different than it used to be" (173). I think these students exemplify two individuals who have begun to lay claim to what they believe and why they believe it. They are transforming what they think as they begin to make it their own, instead of someone else's. This, among other reasons, is why I teach: so that I can participate in some small way in facilitating this life changing and affirming process.

Consequently, it is becoming increasingly clear to me as a professor of political science, as I encounter young Christian citizens at various stages in their college experience, that it is my responsibility to introduce them to the challenge of Jesus. I do so in order that they might begin to ask how the cross comes to bear on the practice of politics.²³ Moreover, I suspect Wright (1999) is on to something when he urges us to "live in prayer at the place of pain in this world" (192). This may seem an odd practice for anyone familiar with the rough-and-tumble world of power politics, but as St. Theresa reminds us: "prayer... consists not in speaking a lot, but in loving a lot" (De Foucauld 2002). The all too common tendency among evangelicals is that in our efforts to establish peace and justice through participation in the political process, we often denigrate or demonize those who oppose us. As the proverbial saying goes, they should know we are Christians by our love, reflected as it should be in the politics of the cross.

²³ In keeping with Finkel (2000), I'm increasingly convinced that telling students this is so— or how it ought to be— seems ineffective, if not counterproductive. It is my hope, to create a classroom environment in which students read, think, discuss, and ideally experience (i.e., service learning) what it means to be a servant, even a suffering one, and how this might translate into actively engaging their political order.

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