

## Biblical Principles of Reform and Regeneration

Culture and Crisis:  
Reconciling Constitutionalism and Federalism in a Time of Crisis

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to provide Biblical perspective on social and cultural reform. At the time of this writing, much upheaval in the form of a pandemic, race riots, political protests have been manifest both within America and abroad. In turn, these disputes have carried over into disputes within various denominations of the Church itself. It can be difficult to ascertain a Biblical perspective on all of these issues. We had previously argued that a Biblical perspective on government requires an emphasis on limited government with a covenantal structure which embodies noncentralization, and federalism; after all, historically, the American system of government was influenced by Protestant Reformation emphasis on covenantal (or federal) theology.<sup>1</sup>

This includes not just sharing power within the federal government, or between the federal government and states. It also favors a grass-roots spread of power, where not only state and local governments have their own spheres of autonomy, but other spheres such as families, churches, non-profits, businesses and other voluntary associations are robustly involved in mediating and addressing societal evils.<sup>2</sup> Also included within this framework is an affirmation of the institutional separation of Church and State. These realms should always remain separate in order to ensure maximum liberty and freedom of conscience.<sup>3</sup> The State focuses primarily on protecting our inalienable rights, and the Church deals with other facets of personal and societal evils. Crimes are a violation of inalienable rights, which as the Declaration of Independence argues, is why government exists – to protect those rights. Inalienable rights are rights given to us by God which cannot be given away or take away.<sup>4</sup> It will be argued that this structural framework can be applied to areas of needed social reform. To do so, it will first be helpful to discuss some of the idols associated with reform and calls for change, both from the right and left ends of the political spectrum.

## Removing Idols

### Social Action Only vs. Apathetic Pietism

On more than one occasion, Christian movements have suffered from over-emphasizing social action at the expense of Christ-centered intra-personal change and growth. The most obvious example in America is the Progressive movement, which was an outgrowth of the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> Kahlil J. Fischer, "The Power of the Covenant Idea for Leadership, Reform, and Ethical Behavior", *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 10, no. 2 (2017): 3. <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol10/iss2/13/>.

<sup>3</sup> David Vandrunen, "The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and the Relationship of Church and State in the Early Reformed Tradition," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 4 (2007): 749. DOI:10.1093/jcs/49.4.743.

<sup>4</sup> Fischer, "Biblical Principles", 4.

Social Gospel movement.<sup>5</sup> This movement was influenced of the Second Great Awakening's call for social reform, most notably with regards to slavery.<sup>6</sup> The greater emphasis on changing the social context tied in nicely with scientific methods for doing so, including data mapping of neighborhoods and social surveys.<sup>7</sup> All of this was further in response to the "Gilded Age" which was characterized by rapid urbanization, the collection of wealth into a handful of corporations, and a sense that the political parties were themselves more interested in power and patronage than they were in offering political solutions.<sup>8</sup> The remedy to these problems was administrative efficiency and a stronger centralized executive.<sup>9</sup> This should not in and of itself be criticized, for certainly we would want well-informed statesmanship and statecraft at all levels of government. But in its worse variants, this emphasis on expertise has favored a greater centralization of decision-making at the expense of local, grass-roots action.<sup>10</sup>

A continuation of this theme can be found in the 1960's and 70's where more liberal Protestant denominations, seeking to expound upon Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity". Bonhoeffer articulated this idea while in prison for a failed assassination attempt on Hitler. He argued that so often, Christianity mired itself in church "hierarchies, forms, jargon, wealth, and power" and therefore lost its efficacy in society.<sup>11</sup> Many American church leaders attempted to apply this idea to their own context, which included confronting a white American society often ambivalent, or worse, opposed to the Civil Rights movement and needed reform.<sup>12</sup> Thus, many pastors in Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Anglican churches urged their congregants to leave the church and focus instead on doing good. This impetus often found itself sympathetically aligned with Marxists who of course were eager to address structural injustice.<sup>13</sup>

The other extreme, sometimes seen in Christian circles, is an over-emphasis on personal, spiritual growth without any emphasis on social action or reform. Believing and living in accordance with a personal, intimate relationship with Christ is of course a key aspect of the Christian life. In turn, there should be an easy connection between this type of

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<sup>5</sup> Bradley W. Bateman, "The Social Gospel and the Progressive Era," *Diving America: Religion in American History*, February 11, 2021,

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/socgospel.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Glass, "Social Gospel," in *Encyclopedia of American Religious History*, ed. Edward L. Queen, II, et al., 3rd ed., vol. 1, (Boston: Marie A. Cantlon, Proseworks, 2009), 933-934.

<sup>7</sup> Bateman, "The Social Gospel."

<sup>8</sup> Frances Lee, "Patronage, Logrolls, and "Polarization": Congressional Parties of the Gilded Age, 1876-1896," *Studies in American Political Development* 30, no. 2 (2016): 116,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X16000079>.

<sup>9</sup> "Progressivism," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir, vol. 3, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference, 2010): 1103, 1105

<sup>10</sup> "Progressivism," 1105.

<sup>11</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: the Faith That Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking, 2017), 350.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis J. Evans, "White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement," *The Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 245, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40211995>

<sup>13</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 362.

personal intimate experience with Christ and personal, intimate connections with other believers. But there could certainly be pitfalls to an over-emphasis on this piety. Hyper-pietism, for instance, would doubtless include an apathy for those who suffer accompanied by an inward-looking emphasis on one's one spiritual state and growth.<sup>14</sup> In the history of fundamentalism, it has often lead to separatism, with an unwillingness to engage the culture, but instead to withdraw from it.<sup>15</sup> Fundamentalists such as Billy Sunday, for instance, were known to have scoffed at liberals who focused on social issues at the expense of eternal ones.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, true spirituality, true faith, starts with a deeply personal, inward relationship with Jesus Christ but moves outward to a care and concern for one's neighbors, community, and the world at large.

### Authoritarianism and Racism vs. Secularism

Throughout history, various church groups, in the name of resisting Marxism or secularism, have often ended up siding with authoritarian regimes. In turn, these authoritarian regimes have often upheld some form of institutionalized racism. Several examples will reveal the complex nature of how this association occurs. One characteristic of this appears first to be that church movements, cognizant of how Scripture confers authority upon the State (Romans 13:1-4, I Peter 2), and wary of Marxist radicalism that would seek to radically upend society, generally would support an authoritarian regime so long as that regime supports or does not threaten church sovereignty and freedom.<sup>17</sup> However, as argued above and elsewhere, a key facet of the State is to protect inalienable rights. Any peace achieved while violating those rights is a violation of the authority (*exousia*) given to the state by God as seen in Romans 13:1-4. The Greek word for power and powers in this verse is indeed *exousia*; therefore, a better translation would be, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher *authorities*. For there is no *authority* but of God: the *authorities* that be are ordained of God."<sup>18</sup>

This was the case in Germany before and during World War II, where the national Protestant Church of Germany generally supported Hitler due to his anti-semitism and his opposition to Marxism. However, the Confessing Church arose in protest and while Hitler sought to co-opt leadership of the Confessing Church, he was not fully able to thwart church resistance to his agenda.<sup>19</sup> One church movement, the German Christian church, along with the *Dejudaization Institute* at Eisnach even sought to fully support Hitler's regime, including his anti-semitism. The German Christian movement, in particular,

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<sup>14</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster, 1981) 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Preston Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 311.

<sup>18</sup> James Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Madison, NJ: James Strong, 1890), 802-3 of the *Concordance* followed by p. 30 from the Greek Dictionary).

<sup>19</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 318

sought a "'people's church' based on blood and race".<sup>20</sup> This in turn ties into the German concept of *Volk*, which called for German nationalism, courage, self-sufficiency, and strength of spirit. Again, this concept existed well before Hitler's ascension<sup>21</sup> and was certainly tied in with a fear of Jewish-Marxist co-option of Jewish Culture (the notion that Jews were prone to Marxism was highly exaggerated<sup>22</sup>). Evangelicals in America would therefore do well to remember that authoritarianism is not the answer to concerns about the radical Left, just as Hitler and Nazism were not the answer to Marxism.

In any case, Hitler's response to this was tepid at best.<sup>23</sup> The "Confessing Church", meanwhile was more resistant and outspoken against Hitler, but even so, it generally sought to focus on its own domain. As Cremer notes, "the more decisive reason for a lack of political resistance of the Church was, however, the theological conviction that it was not the role of the Church to engage in a political overthrow, but to provide spiritual guidance and inspiration."<sup>24</sup> We would of course argue that this is a mis-application of the Biblical notion of institutional separation of Church and State since after all, the Church is only the Church when it proclaims the truth of God's word to all areas of life.

Meanwhile, we might easily make parallels between the German *volk* and American Southern support of the Southern way of life,<sup>25</sup> which included benign care of slaves, and therefore justification of the institution of slavery: "the doctrine that declared slavery or a kindred system of personal servitude the best possible condition for all labor regardless of race."<sup>26</sup> This also included very dubious theological reasoning to say the least, which, infamously tried to force a connection between the curse of Ham and African slaves in America<sup>27</sup> and also argued that slavery was a means of furthering the Gospel among slaves and thus advancing the return of Christ.<sup>28</sup> This perspective also apparently overlooked any notions of indentured servitude in Mosaic law, provisions which assured a voluntary

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<sup>20</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "'Germany Is Our Mission: Christ Is Our Strength!' The Wehrmacht Chaplaincy and the 'German Christian' Movement," *Church History* 66, no. 3 (1997), 522. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3169455>.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Vick, "The Origins of the German Volk: Cultural Purity and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *German Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2003): 241. doi:10.2307/1433324.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Johnson, *Modern Times! The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 116.

<sup>23</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 318.

<sup>24</sup> Tobias Cremer, "The Resistance of the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany and its Relevance for Contemporary Politics," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2019): 43, <http://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1681728>

<sup>25</sup> Wilma Dykeman, "What Is the Southern Way of Life?" *Southwest Review* 44, no. 2 (1959): 163-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43464441>.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Engerman, "The Richness of Intellectual Life in the Antebellum South." *Historically Speaking* 12, no. 5 (2011): 23. doi:10.1353/hsp.2011.0061.

<sup>27</sup> David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, (Germany: De Gruyter, 2017), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ted Booth, "Trapped by His Hermeneutic: An Apocalyptic Defense of Slavery," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 87, no. 2 (06, 2018): 160.

and temporary arrangement between servant and master, and which afforded a host of rights which not generally available to slaves in the Old South:

We can plainly affirm that if the three clear laws of the Old Testament had been followed in the South – that is, the anti-kidnapping, anti-harm, and anti-slave-return regulations in Exodus 21:16, 20, 26-27 and Deuteronomy 23:15-16 and 24:7 – then slavery wouldn't have arisen in America.<sup>29</sup>

Another example is found in South Africa, where the Dutch Reformed Church favored white culture (Afrikaners) over native residents and in control of the structures of the society. In this case, a so-called Calvinist view of nations favored race-based associations for nationhood and little intermingling, similar to the “separate but equal” notion of segregation of the American South. Further, racial reconciliation was rejected, yet again, because of its perceived ties to Marxism.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from racist policies, church groups have been more willing to support an authoritarian regime, which claims support of religious groups, specifically in the name of overturning secular policies. The tragic irony is that many of the movements which were diametrically opposed to systemic racism are also the same groups imbued in a secular and likely Marxist worldview. Such was the case with the emergence of the New Left in America in the early 1960's.<sup>31</sup> Even prior to that, many white Christians were at least initially concerned that Martin Luther King Jr. was implicitly supporting Marxist ideology.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, there is reason enough to believe that he was sympathetic to many Marxist views especially in his later years;<sup>33</sup> nevertheless, he always rejected the materialism inherent to Marxism.<sup>34</sup> And moreover, his calls for racial reconciliation and equality should have been heeded from those who called themselves followers of Christ.

It seems that many Christians fear that concerns about structural injustice equates to political radicalism, as seen in the atrocities of Stalinism and thus a broad, sweeping

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, (United States: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 132.

<sup>30</sup> Ryrie, *Protestants*, 391.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: a History of the Culture Wars*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 10-15.

<sup>32</sup> John Avlon, “Martin Luther King, Jr. a Communist? Why He’s Been Whitewashed,” *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/martin-luther-king-jr-a-communist-why-hes-been-whitewashed>.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Fairclough, “Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?” *History Workshop*, no. 15 (1983): 118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288462>.

<sup>34</sup> John G. West, “Martin Luther King’s Powerful Critique of Scientific Racism, Scientific Materialism,” *Evolution News & Science Today*, January 19, 2020, <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/01/martin-luther-kings-powerful-critique-of-scientific-racism-scientific-materialism-2/>.

rejection occurs of any concerns about the actual source of structural injustice.<sup>35</sup> In the end, it would be quite tragic if the only reason that Marxism and all of its contemporary variants – Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matters, etc. – focused on structural injustice was because the Church has abdicated its role in pushing for reform within the structural/political realm, just as abolitionists did in both the United States and Great Britain. Left for another time is discussing the relationship among all of these ideas and movements. Certainly many have done so.<sup>36</sup> The point is that even if all of these variants are in fact related to Marxism, the fact that they are should not overlook the concerns about structural injustice.

Also worth critiquing is any sense of Christian legalism which espouses a moral superiority of one individual or people group at the expense of others, as if mortals could earn the favor of God through good behavior. This notion, though doubtless an implicit tendency in the human soul, makes a mockery of the salvific work of Jesus Christ – a sacrifice needed precisely because no human was righteous apart from this divine intervention (Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Romans 3:10-12). But it is reasonable to assume that subversion of that gospel truth can in turn lead to a sense of moral superiority, which in turn can lead to an inference that one's culture is superior to another culture group, which in turn can lead to an affirmation of practices like racism and segregation. This conflated sense of moral perfectionism can be fueled by an unholy alliance of self-deception and hypocrisy.<sup>37</sup> After all, as Frederick Douglass recalled from his time as a slave, "For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others."<sup>38</sup> These slaveholders were the ones more apt to be more cruel, and more apt to punish for perceived offense and infringements, even proactively so.

### Structuralism and False Omniscience

Meanwhile, the counterfeit nature of Marxism is found not in its emphasis on structural injustice, but in its emphasis on that at the expense of all else, in large part because of its secular, materialistic assumptions about life.<sup>39</sup> The absence of a personal, spiritual origin to any societal problem is a staple of the Marxist mythology. To the extent that Christian movements have been enamored with that mythology is the extent to which those same movements have denigrated the truly radical nature of the Gospel, which seeks to change

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<sup>35</sup> Scott Coley, "A Man and His Inheritance (When Clarifications Fail)," *Faith, Philosophy and Politics: Christianity, Ethics, & Social Systems*, October 18, 2020.

<https://faithphilosophyandpolitics.org/2020/10/18/when-clarifications-fail/>

<sup>36</sup> Mike Gonzales, "To Destroy America," *City Journal*, September 1, 2020. <https://www.city-journal.org/marxist-revolutionaries-black-lives-matter>.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Statman, "Hypocrisy and Self-Deception", *Philosophical Psychology*, no. 10:1 (1997): 57. DOI: [10.1080/09515089708573204](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089708573204)

<sup>38</sup> Lex Loizides, "Religious Legalism and Racism – Frederick Douglass," *Church History Review*, March 21, 2019. <https://lexloiz.wordpress.com/2019/03/21/christian-legalism-and-racism-frederick-douglass/>.

<sup>39</sup> David T. McLellan "Marxism," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marxism>



hearts on the way to changing social structures. This over-emphasis on structuralism from the Left is perhaps an explanation of why rioting and destruction of private property during the 2020 riots was seen as a possible remedy. After all, if the capitalistic, patriarchal, racist system is the root cause of oppression (including the family<sup>40</sup>), then the only remedy is to advocate for an overthrow of the system.

The point here is that we should reject any notion such as that offered by the Marxist perspective that seeks to affect change *from the outside in*. The assumption that changing structures can change people can be a dangerous one and we only have to look at the atrocities of Stalinism in the loss of millions of lives caused thereby to come to that conclusion. The problem with Marxism is not that it is radical; rather, the problem is that *it is not radical enough and does not deal with the true problem of evil which finds its home in the human heart* (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:20-21).

### Self-Sufficiency and False Conservatism

A close relation to the problem of apathetic pietism is the idea that success in life is earned solely through hard work, individual responsibility, and human ingenuity. To the extent to which this idea is wrapped in Christian ideals is the extent to which it represents a counterfeit Gospel wherein humans can earn God's favor through good works and where wealth is always seen as an evidence of God's blessing, and poverty and suffering are due to personal sin, mistakes, and laziness. This view has many variants throughout history and Scripture, from the council of Job's friends, to the white-washed righteousness of the Pharisees<sup>41</sup>, to the legalism of modern society, as well as the prosperity gospel which has fueled the empires of so many televangelists.<sup>42</sup>

While Scripture certainly tells us of our personal responsibilities to make good choices in life, it also speaks of God's initiating sovereign grace which empowers us to choose life, grow and prosper (Romans 11:34-36, Galatians 6:3, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 2:13). Without any mooring in the Gospel of grace, this perspective can lead to an indifference to the poor and to structural injustice. It can also lead to a political conservatism which is indifferent to the dangers of materialism, crony capitalism, or unguided individualism. This thought is offered particularly with respect to false equivocations between big government and big business. It can be easy to see the former as good and the latter as

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<sup>40</sup> James Jeffrey, "Perhaps Black Lives Matters Was Right about the Nuclear Family," *The Critic*, December 9, 2020. <https://thecritic.co.uk/perhaps-black-lives-matter-was-right-about-the-nuclear-family/>.

<sup>41</sup> D. Louise Mebane and Ridley, Charles R., "The Role-Sending of Perfectionism: Overcoming Counterfeit Spirituality," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 16, no. 4 (December 1988): 337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718801600404>.

<sup>42</sup> Dan Lioy, "The Heart of the Prosperity Gospel: Self or Savior," *The Journal of South African Theological Seminary*, 4, no. 9 (January 2007): 43.

evidence of the success a business gains by working hard via the free market. But we do well to remember Adam Smith's – not Karl Marx's – warnings about business leaders:

People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick, or in some contrivance to raise prices.<sup>43</sup>

Smith was no stranger to the greed associated with business interests, and was quick to warn of the crony capitalism of his day – mercantilism – which benefited the few at the expense of the many. That he would in turn propose that the State has some role in preventing this should not be surprising, nor should it be seen as some emanation of “big government.”<sup>44</sup>

Finally, one facet of conservatism overlooked in this deformation is the doctrine of original sin; true conservatism favors limited government because it is predicated on the Biblical truth that each person has the heart of a tyrant which must be restrained by the biblical law of liberty. This argument, along with supporting Scripture, has already been made, but here it is made with a gentle reminder of how political arguments – even from conservatives – are often accompanied with pride and hubris, when true conservatism should entail humility, thoughtfulness, and above all, self-awareness.

#### Institutionalism, Credentialism and Elitism

A biblical-covenantal model emphasizes noncentralization, community action, and sincere human engagement to address societal challenges.<sup>45</sup> This is in keeping with an attempt to capture the very informal, Spirit-driven, but very impactful interactions of the early church. It also ties in with the idea of Christian realism, as articulated by, and can be seen in, the Jesus movement of the 60's and 70's where people sought to live out the Gospel in real and intimate ways.<sup>46</sup> This perspective can and should work hand in hand with the institutions of government at various levels and should represent a cultural flourishing where human interaction is multi-faceted. In a society where this meeting social needs is reduced solely to the work of credentialed experts and decision-makers, we will see a stagnation of human expression and interaction, and over-growth of the State, and a sterile approach to the depth of human suffering. Christ used as his disciples fishermen, tax collectors, and others, all of whom had questionable *bona fides* from a professional

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Sagar, “Adam Smith and the Conspiracy of the Merchants,” *Global Intellectual History*, (October 2, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2018.1530066>.

<sup>44</sup> Kurz, Heinz D. “Adam Smith on Markets, Competition and Violations of Natural Liberty.” *Cambridge journal of economics*. 40, no. 2 (2016): 615–638.

<sup>45</sup> Kahlib Fischer, “Biblical Principles of Government and Criminal Justice,” *Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy* 1, no. 2 (July 2020): 7. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol1/iss1/3>.

<sup>46</sup> Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right*, 97-98.

credentialing standpoint, and yet their faithfulness to preach out and certainly, live out the Gospel, upended the world (Acts 17:6).

Further, revivals and growth throughout Church history have been accompanied by these more informal arrangements of preaching, teaching and mutual encouragement. The Methodist revival in England for example, included an emphasis on numerous small group meetings where Christians would meet to encourage and care for one another, in classes and bands of varying degrees of voluntary but fairly intense intimacy about matters of the heart.<sup>47</sup> A society and church movement that over emphasizes credentialism and expertise will inevitably lose out on a ground swell of people who see themselves as expositors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their neighbors and indeed to the world itself.<sup>48</sup>

### **Gospel-infused Change from the Intrapersonal to the Structural**

#### Radical Transformation of the Heart and Soul

If the above concepts are idols and extremes to be avoided, what then is the straight and narrow path for Gospel-centered reform? First and foremost, Scripture indicates the change begins in the heart of man (II Corinthians 4:6). Nearly every instance of Christ's comments about what it means to be in the New Kingdom speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit to teach in word and truth (John 4:23-24). Further, he consistently critiqued the Pharisees' overemphasis on rules and regulations rather than the heart of man (Mark 23:27-28). Mark 7:21-22 is an explicit reference to a crisis as the true problem, which is a sinful disposition full of hatred malice and self-centeredness, in contrast to the Pharisees concerns about extra-biblical ceremonial cleanliness. The Epistles continue this trend of focusing primarily on man's relationship with God in the need for the intermediary Jesus Christ and for the power of the Holy Spirit to eliminate sin and lead us to repentance skin growth.

This is not to say that the Bible disavows the need for structural reform. The epistle of James, for instance, warns about rich people in the midst of the believers who use the legal process to exploit the poor (James 2:6-7; 5:1-6). This actually echoes themes from the Old Testament where the prophets warn the people how the rich and powerful use the legal political structure to oppress the poor and vulnerable (Isaiah 3:14-15; 10:1-2; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 2:6-7). Also consider the provisions for forgiving debts and restoring land via the Year of Jubilee<sup>49</sup>, protecting indentured servants<sup>50</sup> and for a judicial System that is impartial and does not favor the rich over the poor (Deuteronomy 1:16-17). The point in providing these few examples is not to suggest that society should be modeled after the

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<sup>47</sup> Winfield Blevins, *Marks of a Movement: What the Church Can Learn from the Wesleyan Revival*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2019), 136-148.

<sup>48</sup> Blevins, *Marks of a Movement*, 159.

<sup>49</sup> Calum Carmichael, "The Sabbatical/Jubilee Cycle and the Seven-Year Famine in Egypt," *Biblica* 80, no. 2 (1999): 224-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42614187>.

<sup>50</sup> Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* 132.

manner of the Hebrew Commonwealth. But Christ promised to fulfill every jot and tittle of the law (Matthew 5:18) and Jeremiah prophesied that the law would be written in our hearts (31:33). Therefore, these structural justice examples certainly suggest the possibility that we should consider structural, political implications of caring for the poor as we are able, while at the same time acknowledging that Christ did not seek to establish a political kingdom (John 18:36).

As mentioned earlier, emphasizing a covenantal approach to society encompasses both a defining relationship among various “spheres of society” which protects and affirms the autonomy of each of those spheres.<sup>51</sup> It also emphasizes the importance of people – common people – and the power of meaningful, interpersonal relationships to effect change. This emphasis on interpersonal relationships, again, does not ignore the importance and need for structural change; both must occur. An emanation of this institutional separation of church and state is the notion of the sin-crime distinction: all crimes are sins, but not all sins are crimes.

### A Biblical Covenantal Matrix for Reform

From that deeply, intrapersonal starting point, a biblical-covenantal perspective might suggest a matrix of sorts for determining the proper role of the State and Church. First, as noted above, we would acknowledge that for lasting and effective change to occur, change should be seen at the heart level first and foremost, as well as in the realm of the interpersonal. This emphasis, again, does not obviate the need for broader, structural level changes. Secondly, any needed reforms might require actions from both Church and State. These two sets of bifurcations would in turn overlap and compliment one another. Generally, the State would focus on *de jure* injustice and the Church and other spheres of society would deal with *de facto* injustices.

### Conclusion

Christ warned us that “Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life,” (Matthew 7:14; KJV). Obedience to God requires an awareness of the nuance of avoiding both legalism and licentiousness, of focusing just on inner piety or just on social, structural justice. To avoid those extremes, this paper sought to provide a biblical matrix for addressing both the structural and the spiritual. Future work will require an application on specific policy issues.

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<sup>51</sup> Timothy Keene, “Kuyper and Dooyeweerd: Sphere Sovereignty and Modal Aspects,” *Transformation* 33, no. 1 (2016): 67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378815625441>

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