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0521838762 - Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today

Franklin I. Gamwell

Excerpt

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United States politics has always been challenged by its relation to religion, because the First Amendment endorses religious freedom and thus religious plurality. During the past fifty years, this relation has become especially controversial because of increasing diversity among the nation's religions and the increasing consequence of government in our lives. In both larger public and specifically academic discussion and debate, views on the role religious convictions and arguments should or should not play in our common life range from the privatization of religion to its indispensable role in the pursuit of justice. Often, disagreements occur in the context of debate over specific political issues – for instance, the permissibility of abortion, the legitimacy and importance of affirmative action, the due forms of criminal justice, the fair distribution of wealth and income, the required treatment of our natural habitat, and the moral propriety of some given military engagement.

But if our politics must determine its relation to religious plurality, so, correspondingly, does any given religious community face the question of its relation to politics. This work pursues how Christians should ask and answer the latter question. I seek to clarify whether and, if so, how active participation in contemporary politics is a Christian calling. Politically, the discussion is focused principally on the American republic. But that focus itself requires address to general questions about the life of Christian witness. Clearly, the responsibilities of Christians in our setting cannot be clarified without asking about the meaning or content of Christian faith and what, if any, abiding relation to political community it prescribes. The answers

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given in this work to such general questions have, I believe, considerably wider importance. Still, my intent is to speak about Christian commitment today within the United States, and more basic understandings are pursued for the sake of relevance to it. Focused in this way, then, the book is about contemporary politics as a Christian vocation.

The idea of “vocation,” which means a calling or a summons, has a long history within the Christian community. In medieval thought, the term was typically reserved for a divine calling to specifically religious activities, especially to the priesthood or the monastic life, and bore hierarchical connotations. Having a vocation in this sense was being authorized for a higher form of service to God. Following the Reformation, “vocation” was released from its restricted usage and, correspondingly, from its hierarchical connotations. Summarily speaking, it came to mean, at least for Protestants, a calling to some distinct occupation or set of responsibilities as an occasion for witness to God’s presence and redeeming activity. Thus, any honest and useful work could be a Christian vocation. The difference between specifically religious and other callings important to human life and the human community became solely one of function, with no sense of higher and lower, so that, for instance, being a member of the clergy and being a farmer could not be ranked in terms of service to God (see Dillenberger and Welch: 49, 234–5). All Christians, we might say, were equally called to be Christians, and the differing vocations given to differing Christians were equally important forms of that more fundamental identity.

Subsequently, “vocation” also acquired a secular meaning, in distinction from designating a Christian calling to some kind of secular activity, and the term now sometimes signifies simply any occupation or business or profession. But there is, even in this secular usage, a legacy from the earlier religious import, because taking one’s work as a vocation often means that one is called to this kind of activity as a contribution to the common good. Whether one works as a farmer or teacher or artist or craftsman, one does so vocationally when one not only strives for success in that particular enterprise but also understands it in view of its importance to the larger context of our life together. In this sense, one might speak of differing kinds of activity as specifications of the moral vocation given to us all. Accordingly,

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the secular idea of a specific vocation can be extended from application to one's principal work or central set of activities and used to designate any specific practice it may be morally useful or important to distinguish from others. Thus, one can speak of one's vocation to be a parent or citizen or friend.

Returning to the Christian context, we may also consider vocations that specify the Christian commitment and do not necessarily mark a form of work central to a person's life. They are distinguished simply because doing so is important to the inclusive purpose of the church. Some of these vocations may be given to Christians generally, whatever occupation or ministry may distinguish one Christian from another. In this sense, they can be called common Christian vocations. For instance, we might discuss being compassionate, the practice of serving those afflicted or grieving, as a specific activity to which Christians generally are called, even if they are not commonly called to receive specialized training in pastoral care or counseling. Similarly, we might speak of care for children, encouraging and educating their growth and integrity, as a common Christian vocation, even if some Christians will properly attend more fully than others to this task. Or, again, perhaps theology is a vocation of Christians generally, meaning that all are called to reflect for themselves, insofar as they are able, on the meaning and truth of their faith when these become problematic, even if only some Christians have the specialized vocation of being a professional theologian.

A common Christian vocation, then, is a Christian calling that does not distinguish some Christians from others by commission to specialized responsibilities within the Christian community or to a certain kind of secular work as one's principal occupation. In this sense, the present work asks about politics as a common Christian vocation. Hence, the discussion is not focused on politics as a specialized profession, whereby a Christian might seek or hold political office or in some other way choose participation in the formal political process as her or his principal work. To the contrary, our concern is how Christian faith relates to membership in the political community. Given that all Christians are citizens, does their calling to a life of faith include a common calling to political activity and, if so, toward what ends? In this formulation, "political activity" means the deliberate attempt to influence or help shape political rule and, thereby, to

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determine the consequences of political order for all affected by it. If, for some or all Christians, the life of faith does not include a political vocation, we can still say that their faith implies something about their political responsibilities, namely, that they should be or may be politically quiescent.

In the United States and the wider contemporary world, many Christians believe that political participation is an obvious and, indeed, central part of the Christian calling itself. Hence, they may counsel, asking *whether* Christians have such responsibilities is hardly necessary. In fact, however, those so persuaded depart from a profound tradition in Christian thought, for which the life of common Christian witness does not include political activity. As I will discuss, this view stretches back to early Christian self-understanding, and, in the expression given there, I will call it the “early account” of Christian political responsibility. Its effect in subsequent Christian life and thought, right up to the present, has been considerable. I, too, will argue for an understanding contrary to that tradition. But seeing why the early account excluded politics from the common witness of Christians and why Christians today should reach a different conclusion is, I will try to show, important for explicating the political ends contemporary Christians should pursue.

This is because a clarified departure from that tradition requires attention to modern political communities that are or approach being democratic. I will argue that politics today is a common Christian vocation because the moral principles implied by Christian faith prescribe, at least in our setting, democracy as a form of political rule and thus democratic citizenship as a general form of Christian witness. As I will try to show in due course, however, this interpretation of Christian belief is controversial because the presuppositions of modern democratic politics, including especially the constitutional provision for religious freedom, are at odds with some basic understandings of their faith pervasively shared by Christians past and present. One prominent case in point concerns what Christians mean or think they mean in claiming truth for their convictions about God and human life. Democracy, I will argue, can only be politics through full and free political discussion and debate or politics by the way of reason; only those political claims that can be validated in reasoned discourse should direct the decisions or activities of the state. In contrast, the majority voice in the Christian tradition has denied

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that the truth of Christian belief can be fully redeemed without appeal to God's special self-disclosure through Jesus Christ. Christian commitment to democracy also implies, in other words, a departure from this majority voice.

In sum, asking whether politics is a common Christian vocation will provide the context in which to spell out the nature of democracy, formulate its challenge, and reconsider the meaning of Christian faith. Proceeding in this way will prove useful because showing why Christian belief prescribes government by the way of reason is incomplete without explicating Christian conceptions of justice and the common good. I will argue that Christians generally are called to democratic activity because they are called to pursue the community of love and to act for justice as general emancipation. While confirming that politics is a common Christian vocation, then, the argument will also define the ends for which Christians should choose their political purposes.

Chapter 1 will review summarily the relation of Christian faith to politics as articulated during the early Christian movement in order to ask whether its exclusion of political activity from the prescribed witness of Christians generally should be accepted today. Chapter 2 will discuss the emergence of modern democracy, the character of a democratic political community, and its challenge to some inherited understandings of Christian faith. Chapters 3 and 4 will respond to this challenge by showing that Christian faith prescribes the way of reason and defines democratic principles of justice.

Chapters 5 and 6 will illustrate the importance of these principles to contemporary politics in the United States. Chapter 5 will discuss religious decisions at stake in public life today, in the sense that disagreements about particular political issues reflect the influence, however tacit, of conflicting ideals for the human community. This discussion centers on religious differences reflected in disputes about domestic political purposes. I believe that a similar and, in significant measure, overlapping analysis can be given with respect to issues concerning this country's relation to the larger world that have become prominent in the early twenty-first century. Seeking to provide that analysis would, however, substantially and unnecessarily complicate the treatment. My intent is to illustrate how politics implicates religious decisions and, thereby, to suggest how the

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political witness of Christians makes a difference of some moment in our contemporary public life. Chapter 6, then, will further illustrate the significance of these religious choices through comment on three specific political issues: abortion, affirmative action, and economic distribution.

*Chapter 1***Render to Caesar**

Christians who ask about their political responsibility often find themselves bound somehow to make sense of the New Testament dictum “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17; cf. Matthew 22:21). In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gave this response when asked whether Jews were obligated to pay the taxes levied by their Roman rulers, and the dictum is relevant to our question if we take “Caesar” to symbolize political rule in general and the payment or withholding of taxes, each in its own way, to symbolize proper response to the rulers. The answer Jesus gave may then seem relevant to how contemporary Christians should understand their relation to politics.

It is probable that Roman taxes were deeply resented by many Jewish people, much as American colonists in the eighteenth century were offended by taxes levied by Parliament. In Mark’s story, the question was put to Jesus by certain Pharisees and Herodians who sought to trap him. If he replied in the affirmative, the Jewish people generally would think him a traitor; if in the negative, he would suffer the disfavor and suspicion of the Roman rulers. His cryptic response served to confound the inquisitors, since Jesus did not specify which things belong to Caesar and which to God. Henry David Thoreau said that Jesus left his inquisitors “no wiser than before as to which was which, for they did not wish to know” (cited in Buttrick: 519). But this means that Jesus did not state whether payment is required. At least to first appearances, it is uncertain what, if anything, contemporary Christians might learn from this dictum about their political responsibilities.

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Indeed, the story can be the more perplexing because Jesus seems to imply that some things are properly given to Caesar in distinction from God. In contrast, nothing seems more persistent throughout the New Testament than this: The One whom Jesus reveals is the abiding source and end of all things, without whose all-embracing power none could exist and in whose all-embracing love each and all have their only ultimate meaning or significance – and, in this sense, all things belong to God. Thus, the life of Christian faith is nowhere more clearly summarized than in Mark's report of how Jesus replied to another question: "'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these'" (Mark 12:28–31; cf. Matthew 22:36–9). This twofold calling is the Great Commandment because finally it is the only commandment, in the sense that all others are applications or articulations of it. We are called to love God in all that we do and, therefore, to lead our lives with no other purpose than to love all those whom God loves, and this means to treat all as individuals who belong to God. As Aquinas later wrote: "The precept of charity contains the injunction that God should be loved from our whole heart, which means that all things would be referred to God. Consequently, man cannot fulfill the precept of charity unless he also refer all things to God" (S.T. 2–1.100.10 ad 2).<sup>1</sup> How, then, could one who renders to God what belongs to God treat anything as if it belongs instead to Caesar?

But perhaps Mark's witness intends precisely that Jesus's directive about Caesar and God should be, as it were, read through the Great Commandment. The dictum need not be perplexing to those who confess Jesus Christ because they know that, in truth, everything belongs to God. Read in this way, the dictum means this: Just as we should love our neighbors because thereby we love God with all our heart

1. References to Aquinas's *Summa Theologicae* (S.T.) will designate in order the part of that summa, the number of the question, and the number of the article; when the cited material is from a response Aquinas gives to one of the objections he considers, the response will be indicated by "ad" and the number of the objection in question. Thus, the present reference is to the *Summa Theologicae*, the first part of the second part, the hundredth question, the tenth article, and the response to the second objection. The translations I have used are noted in Works Cited.



*I. The Early Account*

and soul and mind and strength, so we should give to Caesar whatever we need to give in order to refer all things to God. Accordingly, the question Christians should ask is not “What belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God?” but, rather, “How should someone who seeks always to serve the divine purpose relate to the political order?”

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In so restating the question, we follow the practice of most early thinkers, who sought to bring “the political order within the divine economy” (Wolin: 98). Writing to the church in Rome, Paul asserts that political powers are divinely ordained and thus should be accepted and obeyed. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (Romans 13: 1–2). What prompted Paul to address this matter in this letter is open to debate. Since his exhortation is framed by explications of the love commandment, especially as it should be exemplified within “the one body in Christ” (Romans 12: 5), perhaps he was speaking to contention among Christians regarding their relation to the realm of politics, disagreement the more likely to arise in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, further, his attention focused specifically on a dispute about the paying of taxes, which are mentioned explicitly a few verses later (Romans 13: 6–7), and thus one should not assume that Paul here offers a general prescription for the relation of Christians to political authority. Still, it is noteworthy that the early verses of Romans 13 contain Paul’s only clear statement about political responsibility. That he did not otherwise address the subject at least suggests that active attention to the justice or injustice of the social order did not, on his view, belong to the distinctive task of Christians within the divine plan.

The larger corpus of Paul’s letters more or less clearly conveys a conviction that this task centers on the character and extension of

2. In my discussion of Paul, I am indebted to Victor Furnish, “Uncommon Love and the Common Good: Christians as Citizens in the Letters of Paul” (see Furnish) and correspondence with its author, and also to conversations with Margaret M. Mitchell, although one or both of these scholars may still disagree with my formulations.

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their own community, in which the new life of Christian faith found social expression. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul's earliest surviving letter, the principal "context for moral concern is the Christian community" (Meeks: 130), and this focus persists throughout his available writings. This is not to say that Paul permitted moral indifference toward or withdrawal from the larger society. There is ample evidence that he takes "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" to command love of all people, and this is apparent beginning with 1 Thessalonians: "See that none of you repays evil for evil; but always seek to do good to one another and to all" (1 Thessalonians 5: 15). Christians are called to be peaceful and honorable members of the wider community, to seek the good of all, precisely because God's love embraces all. Still, the Christian community is the locus of God's new creation, begun in Christ, and cultivation of the new life within this alternative community remains the principal object of Paul's moral exhortation. This focus, together with the absence of explicit political counsel other than Romans 13, at least suggests that, for Paul, larger social institutions and political rule may or should, as a general rule, be accepted because God provides through them the civilized order in which the Christian community can pursue its distinctive task. In this respect, the early verses of Romans 13 likely express Paul's more general view of political rule, so that he at least permits and, perhaps, exhorts Christians to be politically accommodating.

Moral focus on the church was, Wayne Meeks argues, widespread in the early Christian movement and helps to explain why it expressed an unusual concern for unity among the fragments dispersed within Palestine and the larger Greco-Roman world. Although conflicts "not only of opinion but of the very shape of the movement" were present "from the earliest times," they themselves betray that the church was marked by "some internal drive toward unity and even uniformity of belief and behavior" (Meeks: 120). On the reading of Sheldon Wolin, the Christian community as a new order of human relationships was a social development of immense importance. Within the legacy of Greek political understanding, still effective in the Greco-Roman world, "political membership was treated as an overriding necessity" for the good or fully human life. But the Christian, Wolin continues, "could entertain meaningful doubts about political . . . membership, because his response was not governed by a hard choice between membership in a political society