When Church Bells Stopped Ringing:
Towards a Public Ecclesiology
for the 21st Century American Church[1]

Introduction: From Christendom to "Christianity"

When the Communists took over Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church was very poorly prepared to resist. The church had more or less accommodated herself to Russian politics for so long, she no longer knew how to stand up to the powers in command. But there was one Russian Orthodox custom in which the church still acted as the church and defiantly resisted Communist tyranny.

Before Eucharistic services, the priest was expected to go ring the church bell.

The bell was a public summons of the entire community to gather for the Eucharistic celebration. It was an audible reminder that God is at work in His creation, redeeming and judging. It was a public declaration that Jesus is still Lord – and so the Communist party is not.

The early Communist regime, as part of its attempt to suppress the church, had outlawed the traditional public ringing of the bell. But those priests, creatures of habit no doubt, had this ritual of ringing the bell. They found it impossible to "do church" without the ringing of the bell. And so they kept ringing it. They defied the state. And so the communists responded by slaughtering and jailing priests by the thousands. *All over the ringing of a church bell.*

It may seem like this was a foolish action on the part of the priests. But the ringing of those bells was a highly symbolic act, supercharged with gospel overtones. At stake was the very nature of the church. And not a few Russian Orthodox priests gave their lives to keep the church from becoming invisible and inaudible. They died because they insisted on *the divine right of the church to be the church*. They insisted, at least in this tiny way, on the public nature of the church's ministry. Those priests resisted one of the most subtle and yet dangerous trends in the modern world: the privatization of the church.[2]

Privatization is the primary way the church in the West has been subverted. Privatization happens when the church accepts the world's way of carving up culture into "secular" and "sacred" categories – with all the important earthly and historical aspects of life (such as politics, economics, education, and so forth) on the "secular" side of the line.

What is this privatization? N. T. Wright illustrates it well with a visit he took to the World's Fair in Vancouver in 1986. At the Fair, various countries had

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[1] This paper is an expansion of a lesson originally taught at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, 2003. Special thanks to Jackie Peacock for helping to prepare the manuscript.

[2] This story about the Russian church priests and their church bells has been adapted from Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 40f. I have not verified its accuracy apart from the account given by Hauerwas and Willimon.

pavilions, displaying different aspects of their national culture. Wright said it was striking to see that the Middle Eastern countries, like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, were so overtly religious in their displays. The symbols that they used to represent their cultures showed very clearly these were Islamic countries, seeking to run society according to the Koran and the will of Allah. Everything else was arranged around this center. The culture and the religion were inseparable. But in the pavilions representing countries from Western Europe and North America, it was very different. Wright explains:

> There was no indication these countries were (or had been) in any sense "Christian" . . . Instead, what was communicated, as powerfully as the Islamic symbols and words communicated their basic stance, was commitment on the part of the Western nations to a particular set of cultural symbols: the factory, the industrial complex, the technological innovation. The message came over loud and clear: these countries were into the business of making money. Industry and technology were the names of the game, and we were playing it better then anybody else . . .

The Western nations identified themselves with a constellation of symbols purely secular, economic, and technological. Whatever presence religion had in those countries was hidden and private, and certainly not worth putting on public display. It was the mirror image of the Islamic nations: religion and culture had been completely separated from one another.

Wright then describes another pavilion:

> [A]t one end of the huge Expo site stood a pavilion different from all the others. It was a Christian pavilion. It was attractive, bright, well organized. Inside were books, films, tracts, an amazing variety of presentations and material, inviting people from any nation to find in Jesus Christ that which they could find nowhere else.
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> Once again I was powerfully struck by a question that has stayed with me. Is the church to sit on the margins of the world, offering a salvation that is an escape, which seems to leave the world to go its own way? Is that really the church's task? Is there no sense in which the gospel has to challenge the central position of technology and business in modern Western society, which has made these the Western equivalent of the Koran? Is there no sense, for that matter, in which the gospel has to challenge the central position that the Koran itself has in many countries in the world? Is the only purpose of the gospel to offer people a private religious option that, at least at first sight, seems to leave the rest of their lives untouched?[3]

Wright's words hit on a nerve. Since the so-called Enlightenment (or En*darken*ment, as some like to call it!) of the 18th and 19th centuries, the world has been cut in half. In the "upstairs" realm, "god" is allowed to exist and do his thing. But he has been banished from the earthly, social, historical realm "downstairs." The Enlightenment project was simple: relegate the deity to the sphere of the private and spiritual, making room for human autonomy in the realm of the public and political. The strategy adopted was very clever, clear, and effective. Its rhetoric has

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[3] Tom Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), 18f.

now woven its way deep into the consciousness of the Western mind. We are now terrified of religion in public and believe religious neutrality to be the key to religious tolerance. Thus, secularization is seen as an inescapable political reality for Western democracies.

As John Millbank has written, "Once there was no 'secular'"[4] – at least in the sense of secular *space* within culture. Secular space had to be imagined *ex nihlo* and then constructed from scratch in order create a sphere of human life which would be governed by "pure reason," free from the dogmatic prejudices of "religion." Or to put it another way, a "private religion" (under the guise of "Christianity') had to be invented in which the religious life was fully severed from public and political life. Millbank's profound thesis is that sociology – which separated out the "social" from the "religious" as distinct factors in human life – in effect became a counterfeit theology and ecclesiology. The problem, of course, is that "religion" is *not* just one factor among many and cannot be factored out of any aspect of human life.[5] Nor, for that matter, can religion be brought into some human endeavor at a secondary or tertiary level. In reality, religion is *always already there* because God is *always already there* and religion is simply our way of interfacing with and interacting with God in our moment by moment existence. But the Enlightenment sought to carve out a sector of life which was free from any kind of religious influence – that is to say, a realm where God is neither active nor relevant. This is the Enlightenment myth. Those who adopt the myth will be surprised to find in the end that not even hell is a secular space. Man never escapes the presence of God (cf. Ps. 139:7-12).

The impact of the Enlightenment shift would be hard to overstate. This movement inverted the worldview that had gripped the West for the previous millennia and a half. Previously, the church had thought in terms of "Christendom" – a Christian civilization, in which Christ's preeminence extended beyond the human mind and heart to every nook and cranny of public life. Christ was Lord of soul as well as body, of the domestic sphere as well as the political. Christendom had its flaws, of course, because even the best of Christian societies (like the best of Christian individuals and Christian families) remain sinful.[6] We should not overlook

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[4] These are the opening words to Millbank's profoundly insightful and difficult work, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[5] "Religion" is a tricky term, and exceedingly difficult to define. Some evangelicals define "religion" as outward acts of piety, contrasted with a "personal relationship with Jesus." In this sense, religion is just a hollow shell of true holiness. But that's not the Bible's definition (James 1:27). As I use the term in this sentence above (and in many places throughout this paper), "religion" is simply the *coram deo* nature of our existence. That is to say, our "religion" is our way interfacing with the living God through the whole course of our lives (and especially in gathered worship).

[6] One of Christendom's major failings is that the church's missional character was lost. Because it was assumed society in general was Christianized, "missions" became something the church did by sending preachers to foreign nations, rather than something that was bound up in the very life of the church wherever she existed. In a Christendom society, the task of the church to bring mercy to the wayward and the broken is easily lost, and the church is in constant danger of being co-opted by the nation-state. One of the goals of this paper is to show that being "missional" and desiring a Christian civilization ("Christendom") are not antithetical or mutually exclusive. But I will also show that the demise of Christendom in the West requires church to become drastically more self-conscious about her missional dimension. We must learn to see the end of Christendom as a renewed opportunity to evangelize the barbarians.

those flaws of airbrush them away. But we should learn from what Christendom got right.[7] The notion that "Christ" and "culture" should be – or even could be – separated was unthinkable. Biblical religion was not something "tacked on" to generic human existence. The gospel was not a layer added to religiously neutral human life. Rather, biblical faith constituted a new way of living life *in its entirety*, a new way of being human. Nothing was "secular," for everything belonged to Christ and came within the scope of his lordship and redeeming grace.[8] Pre-modern expressions of biblical religion acknowledged no dividing line between the public and private realms. Or, to the extent such a line was recognized, Christ was hailed as Lord in the public square every bit as much as in the private sector. Christ's lordship could not be put in a box.

The post-Enlightenment view treated religion as an "aspect" of one's existence. It came to be regarded as one of many social factors that shaped a person's way of living. Other personal features, such as socio-economic class, nationality or race, gender, and so on, were considered just as determinative. Religion could be stripped away and public life remain unaltered because religion was seen as private business. Politics will remain unchanged, no matter what god, gods, or goddesses happen to exist – or not exist – in the belief of the people. In a democracy, "truth" is determined by the will of 51%.

Peter Leithart has captured this radical redefinition of religion quite well. The Enlightenment created "Christianity" – that truncated, individualistic, introspective version of the faith that shrinks it down to an ideology (that is, a set of propositions to which are paid mental assent) and/or to a private experience (which takes place solely in the interior psychology of the individual).[9] Leithart points out the stunningly obvious, but overlooked, fact that "The Bible never mentions Christianity . . . [Instead] the Bible speaks of Christians and of the Church, but Christianity is gnostic, and the Church firmly rejected gnosticism from her earliest days."[10] For Leithart, "Christianity" becomes a codeword for privatized faith. The problem with "Christianity," then, as Leithart points out, is that it is all too easy to think of it as "religious" layer of life added onto a religiously neutral human core. But in fact, religion is pervasive because religion is just our personal encounter with God. And God is always already there, as already noted. *Everything* is religious because God is always present. We can never get outside of God's presence.[11]

Leithart's point is that the modernized, post-Enlightenment conception of "Christianity" is just that – *a concept*. It becomes just another "ism," another idea in

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[7] The whole medieval period is enormously complex. It is possible to give plausible and wide ranging interpretations of the period depending on what one chooses to emphasize. In a paper like this, it is almost impossible to avoid over simplification.

[8] Think of the great Isaac Watts adaptation of Psalm 98: "He came to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found." Unfortunately, these are dead lyrics for most Christians today.

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[11] Cornelius Van Til had a clever way of capturing the inescapability of interfacing with God. He likened God's presence to a radio dial. No matter where you turn on the dial, you are hearing God's voice. And the radio cannot be turned off or the volume muted. If there was any place man could go to flee altogether from the face and voice of God, fallen man would reside there all the time (Rom. 1:18ff).

the consumerist marketplace of ideas. In modernity, biblical faith has been internalized and privatized into an individual belief system.[12] It's a set of doctrines tucked away between one's ears and behind one's eyes.[13] And when this happens the Enlightenment's strategy has carried the field and won the day. Not only is Christ driven from the public square, but Christians are left vulnerable to other Enlightenment attacks, such as the "comparative religions" school of thought, which basically tries to boil down the world's religions to a common essence (usually some kind of moralism, completely devoid of the grace of the gospel).[14]

Of course, as Leithart acknowledges, biblical faith *includes* propositional content. It gives us a "philosophy of life," a comprehensive world and life view. It touches on matters of both the heart and mind. But just about every form of idolatry offers those things as well. As Leithart shows, what separates us is *new life* in a Christ-formed, Christ-shaped community. The church is internal to the gospel because the church *just is* God's new humanity, the fruit and effect of Christ's work on the cross. Even as Adam went into a death-sleep, in order to be given a bride from the side of his body, forming the first human community, so through the death of Jesus on the cross, a bride has been formed out of the water and blood that gushed out of the Savior's side. This community is his inheritance (Eph. 1:18).

This may recall the old fundamentalist-liberal debates of the early 20th century. The liberals emphasized that "Christianity is a life," often focusing on care for the poor or the execution of a political agenda at the expense of Christian truth. The fundamentalists replied "Christianity is a doctrine," and went on to propound those basic "fundamentals" of the Christian worldview. While the fundamentalists were on the right side of the debate in that they represented orthodoxy, over against liberal heresy, the liberals actually had the better slogan: Christianity (rightly considered) *is* a life. It's a life that *includes* very definite doctrinal convictions, but it cannot be reduced to those ideas. The way the fundamentalists fought the battle automatically conceded the public square to the liberals. The hallmark of fundamentalism became "Christianity" as a private system of beliefs and

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[12] I am *not* denying the need for a personalized, individual faith. Evangelicals are right to stress the importance of a "personal relationship" with Christ. But we should be equally adept in talking about a nation's "public relationship" to Christ (cf. Ps. 2:10-12).

[13] Examples of this sort of thing in the modern Western church abound. For instance, earlier in history, Calvinism was regarded a comprehensive way of live, founded upon belief in the absolute sovereignty of God. Calvinists, though often small in number, made a huge impact in politics, economics, art, science, and so forth. But today, Calvinism is generally defined ideologically, that is, as a theological system, reducible to a few points (e.g., the TULIP or the Reformational *solas*).

[14] Secular, Enlightenment arrogance reaches its height when it makes the absurd claim that "All religions are the same." The secular person would have to be virtually omniscient to make this claim. It is a huge faith-claim with no firm support. Besides, it completely disregards what advocates of different faith actually say about themselves and their beliefs. It would akin to an American saying "All Chinese people are the same." We would say such a person knows virtually nothing about Chinese culture or the inhabitants of China. But when secularists say, "All religious people are the same," it somehow gets passed off as brilliant scholarship! Biblical faith, as well as the other faiths, must be dealt with in all their messy particularities.

experiences, but it was not a total way of life and it had no vision for the broader culture.[15]

God's work of redemption takes place in the time-space arena (Ps. 98:1-3). God did not just give us a set of ideas to master; he gave us himself in the person of his incarnate Son. The *Logos* became embodied in the man Jesus. And Jesus formed a community around himself – a community that shares in his very life and mission (Jn. 20:21). Insofar as "Christianity" is something that can remain unincarnated or disembodied, it is a perverse distortion of God's holistic work of salvation. The Bible does not give us a program for individual salvation, abstracted from the life of the community. The church is not a theology club for born again individuals. It is not a Jesus fan club for people who "into that sort of thing" in their spare time. It is not a self-help group or a therapeutic center where one can go to get group hugs. The church, rather, is God's new creation. She is the restoration and reconstruction of our shattered humanity in and through Christ. God's redemptive target is not isolated, fallen individuals; it is the entirety of creation, represented by a new human race formed by virtue of their union with Christ.

Leithart explains the scope of God's salvific work:

> Biblically, however, salvation is not a stuff that one can get, whether through the Church, or through some other means. It is not an ether floating in the air, nor a "thing," nor some kind of "substance." "Salvation" describes fallen creation reconciled to God, restored to its created purpose, and set on a trajectory leading to its eschatological fulfillment. Ultimately, "salvation" will describe the creation as a whole, once it is restored to God and glorified (Rom. 8:18-25). Grammatically, "salvation" is a noun; theologically, it is always adjectival.[16]

The church is the first fruits of God's saving work in the world. Thus, the church models, in principle, human life the way God intended it to be lived. We are God's renewed humanity. We live the life of the future in the present, the life of the kingdom in the midst of the world. As the church, we are a new city, set upon a hill, and therefore distinct, yet existing within the cities of the world. We are an alternative society, rivaling and subverting the idolatrous societies of the world. We are a counter-culture, called to reform and transform the cultures of the peoples around us. We are a kingdom, transcending the kingdoms of earth. And we are a new Israel, a new nation, dwelling amidst the nations of the earth, with our own defining story, rituals, songs, celebrations, and way of life marking us out as a unique people. We are a contrast society – specifically contrasting the light of a gospel shaped life with the darkness of the old fallen world order.

Suppose we were to ask, "What would our community or city look like if everyone here wanted to serve Christ and give him pre-eminence in *everything*?"

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[15] Fundamentalism's privatization was aided and abetted by an increasingly other wordly, pessimistic eschatology (premillennial dispensationalism), which made Christian involvement in the public square seem like a distraction and waste of time – "polishing the brass on a sinking ship," as the saying went. Even today, though the Reformed church has become more optimistic in its eschatological outlook, we still tend to stress "worldview" more than "praxis," ideology more than action, orthodoxy more than orthopraxy. We always need both.

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The church should the answer to that question in a microcosm. We should embody the answer to that question. The church is the put kingdom life on display. Just as car manufacturers release prototype models ahead of time to show in the present what we'll be driving in the future, so the church is God's prototype of the life of the world to come in the present age. In the church, we hold up a picture of heaven, a snapshot (or, better, video, or still better, drama) of resurrection life, to those around us. We show the cities of man what the City of God looks like.

Modern American evangelical Christians do not think in terms of this view of the church because they have a bankrupt ecclesiology. The church offers, at best, vitamins to supplement a staple spiritual diet of personal quiet times, email discussion lists, and fictional books thinly disguised as theology. The church is grafted onto a "personal relationship with Jesus," which relationship is defined in only the vaguest and most sentimental of terms. This privatized connection with Jesus is considered the essence of true religion, rather than participating in new life and community in the body of Christ. For both the Enlightenment-devotees and evangelicals, "religion" is a slice of life, not the overall slant of one's life. It is an isolated dimension of life rather than the totalizing direction of one's life. We have severed salvation from the church, and in doing so we've ripped apart what God intended to come as a package. We've individualized the communal and privatized the public. We split apart religion and politics, and then comfort ourselves by reading that split back in the text of Scripture.

If "Christianity" is essentially privatized in this way, it is no surprise that modern American Christians do not desire a distinctively Christian culture – or even think such a thing is possible. A *U.S. News* poll discovered not long ago that while 62% of Americans said the influence of religion was increasing in their own private lives, 65% believed religion was losing its influence on national life.[17] Personal spirituality is increasing while public expressions of religious fidelity are on the decline. That is the nature of privatization. Such a trend only serves to confirm William Willimon's dictum, "When I hear 'spirituality,' I think 'idolatry.'" We have redesigned biblical religion to fit in with the whims and dictates of an individualistic, consumer oriented culture.

The rise of philosophical postmodernism has not really changed the situation. While postmodernism is supposed to make us aware that there is no neutrality, that there is no such thing as pure tolerance, that everyone is situated within a worldview, a tradition, and a community, the public square in the West continues to operate on principles of modernity. Indeed, the political institutions of our "liberal democracies" continue to insist on religious privatization and individual freedom as their key component. The true postmoderns are really premoderns, namely, theocratic, Christendom oriented-Christians, and fundamentalist Muslims. But these groups are still screened out.[18]

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[17] Cited in Marva Dawn *Is It A Lost Cause,* 29

[18] I am *not* suggesting that theocratic Christians and fundamentalist Muslims share an approach to politics. Formally, there is a likeness, in that both believe that their deity rules over both public and private realms, and therefore all of society should be reorganized in accord with the deity's revealed will. But whereas a Muslim society is going to oppressive and tyrannical, a truly Christian society would be the freest of all possible societies. Indeed, I believe that in the long run a Christian theocracy is the only way to safeguard

In this essay, we seek to diagnose the ills afflicting the church in the America, particularly as those ills are related to privatization as a cultural phenomenon in the West. We will examine the shift from an ecclesiocentric society to the nationalism of the modern state; from community to the self-defined individual; and from the historic "royal" Jesus of Scripture to the domesticated Jesus of liberal and evangelical theologies. Having diagnosed the problem in some of its complexity, we will begin sketching out a way forward out of the quagmire and into a renewed Christian civilization. In particular we will examine what it would mean for the church to recover her intrinsically public, political, and missional character. We will see that the failure of many American churches to recognize that they no longer inhabit a "Christendom" situation is preventing the church from acting as effectively as she might otherwise. But we will also see that the church does not have to wait on the culture at large to be re-Christianized in order to assert her public and political (rightly defined) nature.

An American Gospel?

We have just touched on how the Enlightenment pressed the church into a new mold, creating a new, highly truncated ecclesiology that would barely be recognized by the likes of John Calvin and Martin Bucer, much less medieval Christians. Now we need to explore this shift a bit further, especially as it relates to rise of Western nationalism and the emergence of the modern "state."

Over the course a few centuries, the church went from a public institution, representing Christ on earth in the social matrix, to a privatized club for those with an interest in a personal relationship with Jesus. Enlightenment principles required that "reason" govern the public square because supposedly "reason" is religiously neutral and equally accessible to all. Reason can is universal and can unites, whereas faith is particular and divides. Because the church speaks the dogmatic word of a particular faith, rather than the universal language of reason, the church must be left out of political discourse. The older ecclesiocentric pattern of society, shaped the by the metanarrative of the kingdom of God, had to give way to a newly crafted secularism and nationalism. The plot of this Enlightenment-generated metanarrative centers around ever increasing autonomy for the individual, played out on a field of secularism, fenced about by the "religiously uncommitted" state.

Individuals might still pursue a transcendent teleology, but society as a whole would be limited to this-worldly, immanent ends. No one "common good" could be used to structure the society. Previously the metanarrative of the kingdom of God gave society its purpose and goal and structure. The vision of society's "common good" was formed and molded by the Bible. Now, in the wake of rising modernity, "goods" could only chosen by individuals and pursued in private. Insofar as society itself could still be teleological, the *telos* had to be religiously neutral. In reality, there would no longer be a "common good" because there was no longer a common faith. Thus, the church's social role would be largely diminished, unless the

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the legitimate freedoms of *all* peoples. T. S Eliot's essays in *Christianity and Culture* approximates the kind of Christian society I am envisioning here.

church simply acted to underwrite the emerging metanarrative of secular nationalism (which, unfortunately, all too many churches were happy to comply with, and not just in Nazi Germany). Privatization, as we have seen, makes it all too easy for Christians to unwittingly collude with the idolatrous power of secular nationalism.

Inevitably then, the new ecclesiology and the new political philosophy went hand in hand. Indeed, men like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes developed ecclesiologies (and even biblical hermeneutics!) to go along with their newly developed view of the state. A comprehensive redesigning of society was underway. One way to get at the shift that took place in politics is to look at how religious liberty came to be (re)defined in the wake of secularism's rise to supremacy. Enlightenment philosophy and politics put a squeeze on the church by shifting the focus of religious liberty away from the church as a publicly visible, corporate entity – an institution – to the individual's conscience.[19] Admittedly, fully illustrating a point of this magnitude requires more argumentation than we can offer here, but we will at least offer an initial sketch that can perhaps be developed with more fullness elsewhere.

Many U. S. State constitutions speak of the liberty of the *individual's* conscience: a person is "free" because he is permitted to follow the dictates of is conscience in religious matters. For example, the Georgia state constitution includes a Bill of Rights that defines religious liberty in the following way:

> Paragraph III. **Freedom of conscience.** Each person has the natural and inalienable right to worship God, each according to the dictates of that person's own conscience; and no human authority should, in any case, control or interfere with such right of conscience.

The Wisconsin Constitution includes the following:

> Sec. 1. All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

"All men" here means "all individuals." But in what sense can individuals be "independent"? Is the husband independent of his wife? Are children independent of their parents? Are sellers independent from buyers? We will deal with this view of the "self" as an unattached, free-floating, self-defining, isolated personality below. As the Enlightenment overhauled theology, so it also overhauled anthropology.

But here we note that if the location of religious liberty is the individual's conscience, rather than the institutional church in the public square, "religion" has already been defined in Enlightenment, rather than biblical, terms. Religion has been safely tucked away into the inner recesses where it can be held in check. It is free from the state's control because it is a matter of disembodied ideas and emotional experiences. It is not "incarnated" in the public square (where, no doubt,

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[19] This is *not* to say individual liberty is not a good that should be protected. But our modern focus on individual liberties, as opposed to institutional liberty for the church, reveals how truncated our ecclesiology has become. The church is no longer free *as the church* to speak into the public realm.

it might very well impinge upon the state's agenda). So "freedom of religion" has come at a heavy price. Or to put another way, only religions that are pre-defined according to the Enlightenment's model are truly "free." Religions that have "absolutizing" visions – that would desire to reshape and remold all of social life according to some ideal – are not free. To put it another way, the Enlightenment essentially outlawed the Great Commission. The church is free still free to disciple individuals, but not nations.

The net result of the shift to a privatized ecclesiology is easy to see. The keys to social and political life as a whole have been turned over to secularists. The church deals with the soul; the state deals with matters of the body. The result of this kind of dualism is witnessed on prime time television every night: America is largely a nation of private evangelicals run by public secularists. But Christians are regarded as "free" because, after all, no one tells them what beliefs they can and cannot have in their hearts or in their heads.[20] However, the present social structure does *not* allow Christians to embody those beliefs in American public life, at least not without great risk and social ostracism. In that sense, one might say that pre-Enlightenment forms of faith are illegal in America. "Christianity" is tolerated because it does interfere with the secular agenda, but "Christendom" (or "theocracy" or "Christocracy") is not tolerated.

By contrast, the first point of the 13th century *Magna Carta* concerned the liberty of *the church* as an institution over and against the king (the state). It acknowledges the public authority of the church over her members (including the king if he is baptized) and the authority of the church to discipline the state if need be.[21] In the Magna Carta, "religious freedom" means the *freedom of the church from state interference*, not the freedom of the state from church interference, nor the freedom of the individual from all external authorities. Religious liberty is the freedom of the church to disciple (and discipline) her members, including those who

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[20] The U. S. State constitutions, like the national constitution, do give the people right of peaceable assembly. In a way, this preserves the freedom of the church and acknowledges the integrity of the church as public body. In some cases, the State constitutions have historically even acknowledged that these assemblies are to worship the Lord according to his revealed will (e.g., Vermont) and that this kind of society best preserves and promotes the common good (e.g., New Hampshire). But even then, the overall flavor of the documents is to replace the rights of the church with the rights of conscience. Granted, balancing individual and institutional liberties in civil society is a complex, delicate affair, but at least since the American War for Independence, the scales have tipped ever heavily in favor of the individual over against the church. Ironically, the end result jeopardizes the freedom of individuals because the church progressively loses its ability to hold political tyranny in check and serve as a buffer against an encroaching civil power.

[21] As we'll discuss below, the church's power to discipline politicians and statesmen who are also church members is one of the most effective ways the church can reshape the social order. While such power can be abused, it has often been used for good (e.g., Ambrose disciplining Theodosius, ultimately reshaping public policy for the common good). This would be the most effective way for the American church to halt the abortion carnage, as some Roman Catholics are starting to realize (e.g., Cardinal John O'Connor, who informally disciplined President Bill Clinton by excluding him from important social events in New York city, and Archbishop Sean O'Maelley's threat to excommunicate John Kerry over the same issue). But in order for the church to take this sort of stand, she has to cross over that invisible line that separates the "public" from the "private" in American social life. The church's failure to transgress that boundary is one of the main reasons for her impotence.

hold public roles, and to even act as an institution in the social sphere. The church is viewed as an integral aspect of public life. The church fills public space. She will compete with the state or cooperate with the state in that space depending on the situation.

The text of the *Magna Carta* reads:

> **FIRST, THAT WE HAVE GRANTED TO GOD,** and by this present charter have confirmed for us and our heirs in perpetuity, that the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired . . .

At its conclusion, the charter reads:

> **(63) IT IS ACCORDINGLY OUR WISH AND COMMAND** that the English Church shall be free, and that men in our kingdom shall have and keep all these liberties, rights, and concessions, well and peaceably in their fulness and entirety for them and their heirs, of us and our heirs, in all things and all places for ever.

The point here is *not* that the *Magna Carta* set up a better system of civil liberties than the American nation and American States. The wide expansion of individual liberties that accompanied the Reformation and American War for Independence have been a positive good, and may even be seen as the legitimate outworking of the *Magna Carta* tradition (which is a tradition very much shaped by the church and the gospel). The Reformation's respect for personal conscience was a tremendous advancement in human rights. Rather, the point here is simply that the church's freedom, as an institution, to act in and shape the public square, has been radically diminished in the last few centuries. In its place we have religiously free individuals and a (supposedly, as the myth runs) religiously neutral public arena. The church's role in society has become virtually invisible. Most Christians have accepted the premise that Christian influence in the public arena can only be exerted by the Christian individuals, and not by the church in any form or fashion. Whatever the church, she is most certainly *not* a political entity – which is to say, she really isn't the City of God, the new Israel, of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Those political images and metaphors for the church must be muted. She is a voluntary organization that serves the private needs and desires of her members.

None of us have escaped the influence of this Enlightenment shift. If modern American Christians hear the words "freedom of religion," they instinctively think not of the freedom of the church to be the church, but of the freedom of the individual to adopt whatever belief system, whatever ideology, whatever religious opinions, he wants. Ironically, he may *not* be free to live out those principles into practice because that might involve "imposing" his beliefs on others. Again, this is further evidence that "freedom of religion," American style, is really freedom for Gnosticism (of whatever variety – see, e.g., Philip Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics*) and not much else. Mormons are not allowed to practice polygamy; Native Americans are not allowed to use intoxicating drugs in their religious services as their ancestors did; and Christians are not allowed to press the crown rights of King Jesus in political discourse. Freedom of religion in the Enlightenment sense has been purchased at the cost of the privatization of the church. It's a private freedom, the kind of freedom that a prisoner can have in a 6' x 9' cell. Of course, this is not a

surprise given that for the Enlightenment, "religion" (in the words of Alfred North Whitehead) is what people do with their solitude (solitary confinement?). "Religion" has lost its corporate, public dimension.

The problems faced by "religious freedom" doctrines are intractable. In reality "freedom of religion" is a myth because there is no such thing as "religion" in general (despite Enlightenment claims). There is no such thing as "pure religion" (any more than there is such a thing as "pure reason" in the Kantian sense). There are only *particular* religions (just as there are particular rationalities). And sometimes those religions endorse mutually exclusive, contradictory practices. Most of those religions have a "totalitarian impulse" – that is to say, they have a vision for all of society and culture, so they cannot stay bottled up in the individual's soul without betraying their fundamental principles.[22] We are experiencing this at the present moment in the debate over gay marriage. Behind the conflict over how to define marriage stand different religions, different theologies. The American political order will end up favoring one "god" over another whether it allows or forbids homosexual unions. The same is true of hate speech. "Hate crimes" are just

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[22] It is precisely this "totalitarian" impulse that makes religious absolutism so dangerous in the eyes of the modern secular person. And it is dangerous! The secular person's instincts are right. But two points should be noted: [1] Secularism is a totalitarian faith as well and can just as easily shed blood as any explicitly religious outlook. In fact secularism may be more dangerous because it pretends to be something it is not (namely, neutral and open). The history of the twentieth century shows that secularism is indeed more bloodthirsty than Christendom ever was (e.g., compare the deaths tolls of Stalin and Hitler to the medieval inquisition or Salem witch trials). I am not going to whitewash the church's history since she has often failed to live up to her calling, but neither should we allow the media to exaggerate the church's failings. On the whole, the church has made an incalculable contribution to human rights. [2] Biblical Christianity is unique in that it is about "totalitarian love," not mere power. Only the Christian faith believes in a God who is inherently communal (the Trinity) and open to suffering for the good of others (the cross). The God of Christianity can only be used to violently persecute or endorse hatred if he is twisted into an idolatrous parody of himself (which, granted, has in fact happened at times). The "totalitarian" impulse of Christianity is simultaneously an impulse to love and serve others, including enemies. Thus, Christian absolutism is not a threat to a kind of tolerance, or even a kind of social pluralism. In fact, only a Christian society can support such tolerance in the long run. Christendom eventually collapsed not because it became too tolerant, but it because it became too *intolerant* – and sadly it was mostly due to Christians refusing to tolerate one another! (This is why recovering a proper ecumenism is so important.) As Christians fought with one another, secularists seized control of Western culture, and the church has struggled to exert any kind of benevolent influence on society ever since. The public nature of the gospel must be recovered. After all, Jesus died on the cross to defeat the "powers," which were public idolatries that held whole communities, countries, and civilizations in their grip. The gospel is not a private message of salvation; it is the declaration that wickedness in high places has been defeated – a defeat that cannot help but reshape public life. The contemporary church must realize that only the cross can answer the public idolatries of our day – the arrogant nationalism and scientism of modernity, as well as the nihilistic despair of postmodernity. We minimize the victory Christ won on the cross and collude with the powers that put him there if accept the privatization of the gospel! As N. T. Wright has pointed out in various places, the cross is the one metanarrative that resists deconstruction because it is a story of self-giving love, not self-grabbing power. Jesus did not seize what belonged to him; he relinquished it for the common good of his people and the world. Thus, the "absolutism" of the cross is paradoxical, and can never be understood on the world's terms. It is shot through with humility and sacrifice.

modernized blasphemy laws – only in this case, the blasphemy is not against the God of the Bible but a god of our own making.[23]

Protestant Passion and Political Propaganda

All of this is more comprehensible once we consider more closely the historical origins of the Enlightenment's privatization doctrine: because the "public church" had been the engine of so much violence and oppression following the Reformation's "religious wars," religion needed to be privatized for the sake of social peace. Privatization was a way of making the world safe for commerce, capitalism, and big business. By cramming the church into the mold of a "voluntary organization," religion was made into a matter of private choice. People might still hold their religious views strongly, but they would still be nothing more than private opinions. Theology and worship, accordingly, were pushed in a pietistic direction.[24] Indeed pietism moved in lock step with the rising secularism. As the church moved to the fringe of society, leaving individuals to pursue religions ends on their own in private, the newly created secular state rushed in to fill the void left in the public arena. The church would now aid individuals in cultivating their own spirituality, but would no longer have an outward facing, public dimension to her ministry. She would no longer occupy public space.

In Europe, the religious wars caused by the crack up of the Protestant Reformation rocked society to its foundations in a way we can hardly comprehend from our post-Enlightenment vantage point.[25] Religious dissent in the wake of the

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[23] I am *not* suggesting that "hate speech" is acceptable. It is certainly not. But what counts as hate speech, and how it is dealt with in the public square, must be informed by the Scriptures.

[24] One illustration of this privatization may be helpful. Take the biblical term "regeneration," which occurs two times in the New Testament. In modern evangelicalism, both biblical usages have faded, so that the term "regeneration" refers neither to the new cosmic order inaugurated by Christ (Mt. 19:28), nor to the public, communal rite of baptism (Tit. 3:5); rather it usually suggests a private, unmediated religious experience. This is the legacy of the anti-ecclesiastical shift in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

[25] Peter Leithart, provides a nice summary:

Reformation put a tremendous strain on culture throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 supposedly brought the age of religious warfare to an end, but in the process also did something else significant: by removing religion from the sphere of public truth, the modern secular state was birthed.[26] To greatly simplify, the logic ran something like this: somehow, peace between various warring religious factions in the post-Reformational situation had to be maintained. The newly formed secular state, theoretically religiously neutral and ecclesiastically uncommitted, would take over this role. This newly created state would in turn be governed by another Enlightenment creation, namely, universal reason.[27]

> Modern politics was born, in a more than chronological sense, in the aftermath of the wars of religion. Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed out that until the seventeenth century it was assumed that uniformity of belief was a prerequisite for orderly social life. After decades of bloodshed, violence, and terror in the wars of religion, however, many came to something like the opposite conviction that, in Pannenberg's words, '*religious passion destroys social peace*.' Given a violently divided Christendom, the only sensible solution appeared to be to excise from political life the cause of these horrors -- namely, particular theological claims -- and to replace them with universally acceptable principles derived from human nature and natural law. *Modern politics was thus founded on the principle that religion is a private concern, useful insofar as it inculcates socially approved virtues of toleration and honesty, dangerous if vigorously pressed into the political arena*. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to fault those who arrived at this solution; they were, after all, desperate for peace. Yet, understandable as it may be, the solution is impossible to implement. The notion that politics can function in a religious and theological vacuum is a myth. Politics is concerned with justice; justice is inescapably a moral concept; morality in turn is inescapably religious; and true religion, in the Christian perspective, inescapably includes particular theological commitments. Christianity entails the invariably political announcement that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord; to concede that political actors may legitimately ignore this highly specific theological claim is nothing less than an abandonment of the Christian position ("The Very Modern Christian Right" http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9405/opinion/opinion.html, emphasis mine).

Also, Lesslie Newbigin:

> The nation-state, replacing the old concepts of the Holy Church and Holy Empire, is the center-piece in the political scene in post-Enlightenment Europe. After the trauma of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, Europe settled down to the principle of religious coexistence, and *the passions which had formerly been invested in rival interpretations of religion were more and more invested in the nation state*. Nationalism became the effective ideology of the European peoples, always at times of crises proving stronger than any other ideological or religious force (quoted in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 34, emphasis mine).

[26] One of the sad ironies in this whole shift, of course, is that the secular state has shed far more blood than the religious wars ever did.

[27] Not everyone agrees this is the way it happened, even if this is the way social contract advocates argued for the new political order. For another interpretation of the wars of religion and the rise of modern politics, see Cavanaugh *Torture and Eucharist* 4ff. Cavanaugh says,

> As the story is told, the separation of religion and politics was necessitated by the violence between Catholics and Protestants following the Reformation. Religious passion and coercive power is a dangerous mixture. Their differentiation with the creation of the modern state would be the only way to secure peace.

Cavanaugh disagrees with this standard genealogy of the secular political order:

> Protestants and Catholics often fought on the same sides of battles, for what was at stake in these wars was not mere doctrinal zealotry but the dominance of the rapidly centralizing sovereign state over the local privileges and customs of the decaying medieval order. In other words, the wars were the effect of the rise of the centralized modern state and its need to create an autonomous political sphere from which would be excluded its greatest rival, the church. To call these 'wars of religion' is anachronistic, for what was at stake in these wars was the very creation of 'religion' as a universal impulse essentially separate from an activity called 'politics.' The resulting appearance of the plural 'religion*s*' is said to make the secular state necessary, but in fact there is nothing inherently violent in religious pluralism and theological politics *unless* one assumes that politics means the totalizing practice of the state. The distinction between politics and religion was not discovered but invented. Before the seventeenth century politics was associated with the commonweal in a broad sense, a political and moral order which included what we call state and society. The distinction of ecclesial and civil powers in the medieval period was a distinction not of spatial jurisdictions, not of means, but of ends; the temporal power served the temporary ends of *civitas terrena*, which was passing away . . . The state's monopoly on legitimate violence is meant to produce peace by resolving the conflicts in what has become known as 'civil society,' that is, the social organizations which stand 'outside' the state by virtue of their lack of access to the means of coercion. Even those who are keen to limit the state's power still rely on the myth of the state as peacemaker, as the place where the conflicts of civil society are taken up and resolved. Civil society, after all, is said to be necessarily a place of conflict, between workers and mangers, retirees and taxpayers, members of one religion and members of another. It is the state's responsibility to oversee and absorb these conflicts through its political mechanisms. Many variations on the concept of social contract exist, but all agree that peace depends at the very minimum on individuals surrendering the right to use violence to the state, the impersonal center of sovereignty. Peace, therefore, depends on the differentiation of the universal state from all particular associations beneath the state, and the limiting of the power of the state. The differentiation is usually depicted in spatial terms; religion especially must be 'removed' from the 'sphere' of the state in order to assure peace . . . Much of contemporary Christian thinking on church and state is intent on limiting the power of the state, but in fact adopts Hegel's soteriology of the state as peacemaker for the conflicts inherent in civil society . . . Because the social is the realm of conflict and compromise, the purity of the Gospel must remain a possibility only for the individual. The Gospel is allowed an inchoate motivational influence on history through the actions of private individuals; the church is a collection of such individuals, and not in any sense a communal enactment of an alternative 'politics' within history . . . . My suspicion is that the establishment of a political realm which fundamentally excludes the body of Christ as a body does not so much *solve* conflict as *enact* it. The rise of the modern centralized state is predicated, as we have seen above, on the transfer of authority from particular associations to the state, and the establishment of a direct relationship between the state and the individual.

I am not prepared to adjudicate between the standard reading of the history and that of Cavanaugh. For our purposes, it does not matter all that much, since both interpretations agree that the supposed split between religion and politics occurred at about the same time in history and required a corresponding overhaul in ecclesiology. The fact is, the social contractarians won the day, whether or

Thus, in Europe, the modern state arose directly out of the disunity of the church. Nationalism was the product of a failed ecclesiology. Statism was the necessary antidote to a fragmented church. Once upon a time, the religious consensus of Christendom had provided the culture's stability and cohesion. One faith, one Lord, one baptism had been the glue that held society together. Now that older consensus had evaporated. A weakened, fragmented church required a strong, centralized, secular state to maintain order and keep peace. As Martin Marty has pointed out, the disestablishment of the Western church was the single biggest cultural revolution since the time of Constantine.[28] We are still coming to grips with its effects, and indeed, some churches are still not up to speed.

No one has done more to expose the link between denominationalism and secularism than Lesslie Newbigin. Denominationalism is the church's self-betrayal, the church's institutionalization of her own ethical failure to live at peace and offer a public witness to Christ's lordship. In his 1986 work, *Foolishness to the Greeks,* Newbigin dealt with the problems of denominational Christianity:

> Richard Niebuhr's dictum, "Denominationalism represents the moral failure of Christianity" has often been quoted; but he wrote that more than fifty years ago. Today the defense of denominationalism has become respectable . . . [Today] denominationalism is celebrated as the great gift of North American Christianity to the universal church.

Denominationalism is defended on the grounds that no denomination claims to be the only true church (as in a sect) or that the state should support and defend it above other associations. Denominations allow Christians to clump together into organization where believers agree; the existence of denominations does not preclude "spiritual" unity with other Christians across denominational lines.

But is this "spiritual" (or invisible) unity sufficient? Can denominations be faithful tools of the catholic church in this fashion? Or to put the question Newbigin's way, "How serious is it that the denominational principle requires (as all its

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not they had their history facts straight. "Secular" space was created to drive Christian faith out of politics. Whether the wars caused the rise of the secular nation-state or were the effect of the already emerging secular nation-state is a question to be settled at another time.

[28] Nine of the thirteen original American colonies had established churches. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights was not meant to prohibit states from establishing religion as they pleased; it did prohibit Congress from creating a national church. For an interesting study of the First Amendment from a unique angle, consult Kenneth Craycraft's *The American Myth of Religious Freedom.* Craycraft argues, with some degree of plausibility, that the ultimate intent of the First Amendment was not to protect religion from state interference, but to protect the state from religious involvement. Even if Craycraft's work could be challenged on historical grounds, there is no doubt this is how the amendment has come to function in modern America. Thus, religious freedom in America is a myth – we are certainly not free to practice ecclesial Christianity -- that is, Christianity with a robust public and communal dimension. Oliver O'Donnovan likewise calls the First Amendment the symbolic end of Christendom, since it "ended up promoting a concept of the state's role from which Christology was excluded, that of a state freed from all responsibility to recognize God's self-disclosure in history" (244-5). Again, this may not have been the *intent* of the framers (in fact, they probably could not have even *imagined* a society so completely whitewashed of public religious expression), but it has certainly been the *effect*.

defenders agree) the surrender of any claim to be the church in the sense in which that word is used in the New Testament?" In other words, are denominations acceptable substitutes for the parish or city-based churches we find in the apostolic era? Can denominations adequately represent the new Israel? Newbigin answers in the negative:

> In their view [that is, the view of those promoting denominationalism], the church in its true being is invisible; the denomination is a partial manifestation of the church but makes no claim to be *the* church. It is a voluntary association based on the free personal choice of a number of individuals to cooperate for certain purposes . . .
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> It is the common observation of sociologists of religion that denominationalism is the religious aspect of secularization. It is the form that religion takes in a culture controlled by the ideology of the Enlightenment. It is the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed. As Thomas Luckman says, "Once religion is defined as a private affair the individual may choose from the assortment of ultimate meanings as he sees fit." The denomination provides a shelter for those who have made the same choice. It is thus in principle unable to confront the state and society as a whole with the claim with which Jesus confronted Pilate – the claim of the truth. It not, in any biblical sense, the church . . .
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> [Denominations] cannot confront our culture with the witness of the truth since even for themselves they do not claim to be more than associations of individuals who share the same private opinions. A genuinely ecumenical movement, that is to say, a movement seeking to witness to the lordship of Christ over the whole inhabited *oikoumene* cannot [merely] take the form of a federation of denominations. It must patiently seek again what the Reformers sought – "to restore the face of the Catholic Church."

Only when we recover a genuine catholicity will we challenge the world with a "coherent and credible Christian witness to the whole human community in that place."[29] Thus, the reunification of the church should be a high priority on our *political* agenda. Reuniting the church will do far more to shape American public life that getting "our candidate" into the White House. Only a unified church can challenge secularism and pluralism.

It should be noted that this was not the first time in history religious pluralism was exploited for political ends, in particular, to establish civic peace. Indeed, the strategy of the Enlightenment philosophers is one that has been adopted again and again down through the corridors of history. The book of Daniel is instructive. King Nebuchadnezzar did not mind various expressions of "private piety" in his empire, provided people were willing to bow down to his statue. This civic religion was a public way of gluing together the various competing religions and keeping peace. Worship who or what you want in private; pledge loyalty to the empire in public, or else be accused of treason. Daniel's three friends refused to privatize their faith, and the end result (after passing through a fiery trial!) was Nebuchadnezzar's conversion and public recognition of the God of Israel (Daniel 3-

[29] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, 144-146.

4). Similarly, the Roman Empire tolerated a wide range of religious diversity, provided citizens gave ultimate public allegiance to the Caesar. A religion could be licensed so long as it agreed to Rome's privatization plan. Because the early Christians refused to comply, and would not allow the church to become a pawn of the state, they were regarded as atheists![30] The Empire offered at one point to give Jesus a place in the pantheon of that gods (that is, a "place at the table" in Rome's civil discourse) but the church rejected the offer. They knew Jesus was not one deity among many; he was the Lord and Conqueror of the pagan idols. His claims and truth and lordship were every bit as public and totalizing as Caesar's; indeed, even more so. They could not purchase peace for themselves or the empire at the price of fidelity to their King and Savior.

Antidisestablishmentarianism

While America kept a thicker veneer of Christian faith in its civic discourse, in the main, the new nation followed its older brothers in Europe. If anything, the newly formed government in America in the late 18th century was even more conscious of the "dangers" posed by public religion. American "civic religion" might use Christian jargon, but the Enlightenment would filling the content of those terms in its own way. George Will says the founding fathers

> wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe . . . [Thomas Jefferson] held that 'operations of the mind are not subject to legal coercion, but that 'acts of the body' are. 'Mere belief,' says Jefferson, 'in one god or 20, neither picks one's pockets nor breaks one's legs.'

For Jefferson, religion is by nature disembodied and Gnostic, sectarian and individualistic. It is 'mere belief,' rather than a way of life with communal practices. Religious freedom amounts the fact that the state cannot tell you what propositions and ideas can flit about in your skull. For Jefferson, there is no deep connection between theology (the kind of god one serves) and praxis (the kind of character one embodies). Again, according to Will, this view

> rests on Locke's principle . . . that religion can be useful or can be disruptive, but its truth cannot be established by reason. Hence, Americans would not 'establish' religion. Rather, by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religion private and subordinate.[31]

In other words, religion was fine for private individuals in the new nation. But reason alone was allowed sway in the public square. As Will points out, in the American scheme, Christianity has been subordinate to politics and economics virtually since our nation's inception. Religious pluralism would not interfere with public peace because religious convictions would not be welcome in civic life. The founding fathers of our republic aided and abetted the relocation of religious liberty from the institutional church to the individual conscience, and in doing so

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[30] See R. J. Rushdoony, *The "Atheism" of the Early Church.* Rushdoony quotes Justin Martyr: "We confess we are atheists so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity."

[31] Quotations from Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 200.

remodeled Western politics and ecclesiology in a revolutionary fashion. America would become the first secular state. The ratification of the First Amendment effectively ended Christendom and implicitly rejected the lordship of Christ over public life.[32]

The federal government played the tune and the individual States began to dance to its music. By the early nineteenth century, the last of the State churches in the United States was being dismantled. While the establishment system had its problems – many of them rather severe – it at least guaranteed the church an opportunity to be a cultural force. How the church used her cultural power was simply a matter of faithfulness, but there was no question the church would be a major player in shaping the culture if she desired to be.

Disestablishment played a vital role in the de-centering of the church in American society and the secularization of public life. Ann Douglas says,

> Between 1820 and 1875 [the years following disestablishment], the Protestant church in this country was transformed from a traditional institution which claimed with a certain real justification to be a guide and leader to the American nation into an influential ad hoc organization which obtained its power largely by taking its cues from the non-ecclesiastical culture on which it came to depend.[33]

In other words, from that point on, the church would no longer set the agenda for the nation. Rather the political aristocracy would set the agenda and (maybe, if convenient) ask for the church's rubber stamp. Whatever influence the church was able to maintain was kept at the price of compromise. The church would no longer exercise any genuine prophetic leadership role in cultural formation. From the early nineteenth century onwards, America would accomplish her goal without reference to the church, without the church playing any key part in the American drama. The church was demoted from playing the lead part to working on stage props behind the scenes.[34]

Over time, in our collective consciousness, loyalty to the American nation came to replace loyalty to the church. There is nothing wrong with patriotism, of course, kept in its place. But the form of patriotism that arose in America has been quite problematic.[35] "One nation, indivisible"[36] replaced "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" as the chief point of integration for our diverse nation. "One nation, under

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[32] Of course, Christ remains Lord whether we acknowledge him or not. We cannot make him Lord since his Father has already enthroned him. But we are called upon to recognize him for who is, both publicly and privately.

[33] *The Feminization of American Culture* 24. See also DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity* ch. 13-14.

[34] The profound shift may be seen in looking at any of the numerous studies on the influence and importance of the clergy (especially Presbyterian) leading up to and during the War For Independence, and then their sudden lack of influence and decline in importance shortly afterwards. Of course, some may say the clergy were not as relevant as they may have appeared prior to the War since they were riding the wave of a cause most colonists would have supported anyway. Whatever the case, a steady waning of clerical influence is obvious.

[35] On the oddity of American nationalism, see Nathan Hatch *Democratization of American Christianity,* especially 63f.

[36] "Under God" was not part of the original Pledge of Allegiance.

god"….but what god? Certainly not Jesus! Or the Trinity! In the minds of many, America became a sort of "Redeemer Nation" and "the primary instrument of God's meaningful activity in the world."[37] The nation itself (or political parties within the nation) became the primary society in terms of which Americans found their individual and group identity.

Americans thus have never given the church much of a role in public and political life. America was born out a truncated ecclesiology. Indeed, the nation itself stepped into the void left by the lack of ecclesiology. America as such became a surrogate church. Much is made of the fact that many of our nation's key founders expressed adherence to some form of Christian faith, and the residual influence of the gospel on our nation is undeniable. But what is often overlooked is that the brand of faith most of the founders subscribed to gave little place for the church. Martin Marty gives some helpful background on this distinctive made-for-America ecclesiology:

> Thomas Jefferson had said he would not to heaven if he must go with a group, sect [that is, as a member of a church]. Thomas Paine, his contemporary, averred that his own mid was a church. More than a century later, William James defined religion as momentous private choice and Alfred Whitehead as what one did with solitariness. Little wonder that in the face of such attractions, public faith in its social forms, the public church and the civil public religion, came to be unsatisfying to many.[38]

Even better men like James Madison did not believe the church could play a helpful role in the public arena; instead, the church was accused of serving as an agent of oppression and tyranny and division. In many respects, the founders' deeper loyalties seemed to lie with ancient Greece and Rome than with the apostles. Natural law, rather than the gospel, was called upon to serve as the chief cornerstone in the American Republic.

Given the parameters of American civic religion, it is not surprising many American Christians feel little or no need for the church. The church is viewed as one of many "volunteer groups," like a Kiwanis Club. It is good for society (perhaps) because it encourages civic virtue in its members, allowing democracy to run more smoothly. In that way, the church endorses and supports the larger American cause. But the church is not viewed as a model city or a new Israel or the new creation inserted into the midst of the old. Whenever the church in America has made baby steps towards a more robust social role, she has quickly been beaten back into a corner by overriding public opinion. Thus, the church has watched most major events in American history unfold from the sidelines. American churches have not used the keys of discipline to hold politicians in check; they have not modeled racial reconciliation at the Lord's table frequently enough to make a real difference in the broader culture; they have not used imprecatory prayers to deal with wickedness in high places; they not followed up evangelism with discipleship that trains new converts how to live out their new found faith in the public square and in the

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[37] See Peter Leithart *The Kingdom and the Power* 7ff.
[38] Martin Marty, *Public Church,* 103.

culture; and so on. In short, the church has become more of a mirror of American culture than a witness to American culture.

Thus, it should be clear the narrative of "religious" liberty, especially as it evolved in the American context, is not innocent of deeply problematic presuppositions, from a consistent Christian point of view. The Enlightenment made us religiously "free" by making religion a matter of private devotion. It made us "free" to face the secularized state without the buffer of a protective, powerful church as a counter-measure. This modernized understanding of "religion" would have been incomprehensible to Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. For them religion was centered in (though not confined to) the church because in the church, God is present to offer Christ in the means of grace, in the public administration of Word and sacrament. Preaching and the sacraments are seen as intrinsically political because they bind us to Christ as our ultimate authority. For these theological giants, religion was a matter of fact, not subjectivity. It was public, not merely private. It was not just a matter of internal ideas, but of communal practices. It was a holistic way of life, not a compartment of life. It was not an aspect of culture but simply culture itself.[39] And the gospel that created the public church also demanded the reshaping of society in accord with Christ's pattern of life.

The Lordship of Christ, the Modern State, and the Promise of *Shalom*

As we have seen, the Enlightenment sought to make religious pluralism "safe" by privatizing religion. As the story runs, the Enlightenment movement, led by architects like John Locke, Thomas Hobbs, and Jean Jacques Rousseau invented the modern state as an answer to the ecclesiastical diversity and fragmentation falling out of the Protestant Reformation. This newly formed, rational state was, in many respects, a false copy of the church offering a false plan of salvation – an alternative ecclesiology and soteriology. The Enlightenment's truncation of the church and expansion of the nation-state went hand in hand: as religion was privatized, politics was secularized.

The secular state would save us from the misery and warfare caused by differing religious convictions. It would deliver us from the religious wars that wracked Europe after the Reformation. The state would domesticate the church and put it in a cage to keep us safe from overheated dogmatists. The state rather than the church would be the agent of uniting humanity by giving the people common political ends such as "equality" or "freedom" or "making the world safe for democracy." The state would ensure people would have no higher (public) loyalty than the political order.

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[39] This is not to say that biblical religion cannot incarnate itself in a variety of cultures throughout the world. But the fundamental bent of Christianized Chinese culture will have the same basic underlying commitments as a Christianized Canadian culture, even though those commitments will be expressed through a different language, customs, etc. I am not here advocating a kind of new cultural imperialism or cultural uniformity. I am simply emphasizing that culture and religion are two perspectives on the same total reality. A Christian in China and a Christian in Nebraska share more with each other than they do with the non-Christians living next door to them.

This is why Rousseau, a defender of modern statism, believed that Eucharistic fellowship among churches, that is, between different Christian groups, threatened the unity of the state. He knew a fractured church was weak; a united church could rival the secular state.[40] If the Eucharist was used to transgress national and cultural boundaries, it would redefine citizenship; it would make membership in the trans-national "catholic church" more important than belonging to a particular nation-state. It would be more important to be Christian than to be American or German or Southern or African-American or Chinese or whatever. Thus, the nation-state had a stake in making religion over into a commodity with multiple choices and no centralized power. This, of course, was the rise "low church" American denominationalism. Christians were all too willing to simply apply the emerging consumerism to the ecclesiastical realm.

Rousseau was right: A fragmented church has not been able to command the loyalty of the people in the way a unified state has. A new Tower of Babel has been born, in which Christians are divided from one another, and thus impotent to stand against the rising tide of political secularism. Meanwhile, the state continues to gobble up more and more cultural territory to itself (e.g., education, the arts, welfare, health care, etc.). A weak church and a mega-state go hand in hand.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, faithful Christians lost sight of the intrinsically political nature of their faith. Politics and faith became separate, parallel pursuits, never intersecting. The former was totally immersed in human culture, with no transcendent references point. The latter was formulated in such an extreme transcendent way, that it was of little cultural value. The old cliché, "he's so heavenly minded, he's of no earthly good," has proved true in the case of evangelical church.

Biblically, we can say that *the political is always religious and the religious always political.*[41] The New Testament is, in fact, shot through with political language. This political vocabulary has lost for a long time, though it is being regained today by a wide swath of scholars such as Stanley Hauerwas, Rodney Clapp, N. T. Wright, Peter Leithart, John Millbank, Barry Harvey, Oliver O'Donovan, Rodney Stark, Richard Horsley, George Lindbeck, William Cavanaugh, and so on.

The gospel is an intrinsically political message. This is not to say the gospel consists in particular pieces of legislation; rather it is to acknowledge that the gospel announces that the world has a new king – Jesus Christ. The Greek term *evangelion* was used in the ancient world to announce decisive political events of a public nature, such as the ascension of a new emperor, a great military victory, the birth of a royal heir, and so forth. Some have suggested that "gospel" should be translated as "political tidings." The term was decidedly public in nature in the first century

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[40] Cavanaugh

[41] "Politics" here is being used the broad, classical sense. Thus the political is not merely the organization and administration of civil power (what Paul called the sword in Romans 13), but the structure and ethos of human communities (the *polis*) as a whole. Thus, the "political" is roughly synonymous with the "public" or "social." The Enlightenment reduced the "political" to civil power and legislation, just as it reduced "religion" to an ideology and/or private experience. But those definitions preclude Christian faithfulness in the public square.

context. It did not announce a new religious experience on offer; it announced a new state of affairs, the dawning of new phase in the imperial narrative. To the extent that American Christians have lost sight of the intrinsically political dimension of the gospel, they have lost touch with the apostolic tradition. The gospel is the announcement that a new world order has been established through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is God's public service announcement. It is the announcement that "there is a new sheriff in town," that things are now going to be in put right on earth as they are in heaven.

Moreover, the gospel is politically charged because it has everything to do with the way we structure communal life in society. The biblical metanarrative reveals that God originally intended humanity to live in harmonious community. The fall wrecked that unity and turned diversity into division. The gospel is God's work in Christ to restore creation and to rebuild human community. Think how much time politicians spend trying to find ways to get people to live side by side in peace, without killing one another! Think how much time politicians spend trying to achieve compromises between competing racial, social, and economic groups! And yet those contrived solutions are the equivalent to treating tumors with band-aids. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put humanity back together again. Only the gospel of Christ can mend the ripped fabric of human society. Of course, the church's failure to bear witness in this way has been disastrous. The modern church is like a detective wandering about looking for clues to a murder mystery, never realizing the solution has been in his hip pocket all along. The gospel is the answer to all the public and political ills of the modern world.

To go one step further, we can add here that we must avoid thinking of the relationship of gospel and politics in a "two-step" fashion. The gospel does not merely have political *implications* which come in at some secondary level. It's not as if the gospel is apolitical at its core, but then intrudes upon political matters when one moves out to the periphery. Instead, we must say that politics is internal to the gospel all along the way. Politics cannot be "brought into" the sphere of the gospel because the gospel was never separated from politics in the first place. The core declaration of the gospel, "Jesus is Lord" (Acts 2:36; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3) is as political a statement as one can make. It cannot be translated into non-particular, universal categories that meet the requirements of Enlightenment political philosophy. The announcement that Jesus is Lord demands that human society be structured in a certain way. It demands that we not exploit each other, that we turn the other cheek, that we cross over and erase all kinds of lines between the races and classes, that we pursue justice and truth in all our relationships, and so forth. "Jesus is Lord" is the seedbed of a far greater social revolution than "Liberty or death" or "Peace, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or "Liberty, fraternity, and equality " Those other slogans are supercharged political declarations, to be sure, but none of them are as radically subversive and transformative as the declaration of Acts 2:36. Thus, we do not need to *add* politics to the gospel; rather, we need to understand the political shape the biblical gospel has had all along, and restructure our own lives and agendas accordingly.

Early opponents of the church understood these issues. Pagans knew the declaration of Christ's lordship was a threat to the status quo of the Roman Empire.

In Acts 17, the Christians are accused of treason against Caesar because they were preaching "another king – Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Here, an ordinary, mundane Christian practice (preaching the gospel) is seen to be a directly political action. Indeed, it turns the entire existing social order "upside down" (Acts 17:6) – or more accurately, from the perspective of the gospel itself – right side up. If our evangelism does not lead people to believe we're proclaiming an alternative King and kingdom, we have fallen short of the biblical message.[42]

Jews also had an acute sense of the politics of the gospel. The gospel-wrought reconciliation of Jew and Gentile believers in Christ (cf. Eph. 2:11ff) is thoroughly political. It restructures the ethics and makeup of human community, transforming the old world order into something new. Jews understood very clearly that the gospel turned their political order upside as well, every bit as much as the Gentiles. The gospel caused just as much chaos in Jewish contexts as it did in pagan ones (cf. Acts 19:21ff; 21:26ff).

Modern Christians are often more "modern" than "Christian" at just this point. The "Religious Right" is a case in point. The "Religious Right" is the creation of American evangelicalism, as an attempt to "apply" the gospel to American politics. But the movement is deeply flawed because it follows the Enlightenment in defining politics too narrowly (as a civil power game) and never calls into question the basic assumptions of modernity (e.g., the nature of "religion" as a private belief system or ideology). It plays by modernity's rules instead of the gospel's rules. It does not make the declaration of Christ's lordship the center of its political agenda; indeed, the "Religious Right" is usually far more modest, asking only for a "place at the table" of American public discourse. But Christ did not tell us to get him a place at the table of religious pluralism; he told us to make the nations his disciples (Mt. 28:18-20).

The "Religious Right" still operates in terms of the religious freedom of the individual rather than the freedom of the church to be the church. It is based on the same heretical ecclesiology as the Enlightenment. The "Religious Right" does not consider the church a player in the public arena. There is still a lingering tendency on the part of some politically active evangelicals to view politics, narrowly defined, as the source of cultural transformation. In this respect, not only has the movement lost sight of the social role of the church, but the "Religious Right" has not come to grips with the end of Christendom, and still looks rather naively to the civil government and other cultural institutions (e.g. Disney, Wal-Mart) to uphold vaguely Christian moral standards. It is ironic that many involved in the "Religious Right" are quicker to "discipline" (via boycotts) major corporations like Disney for failing to uphold traditional moral values, even though they generally fail to discipline members of their own congregations for moral failings![43] They're looking to extra-ecclesiastical structures to do their disciplining for them. They must learn that the world is the world; the job of the church is to provide a contrast to worldly society by being holy (distinct, different) at precisely those points where the world is most fully rebelling against Christ's lordship.

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[42] Obviously, this indicts the vast majority of American evangelicalism's evangelism.

[43] Thus, the same Southern Baptists who pushed for families to boycott Disney failed to bring any discipline against President Bill Clinton, decide his pro-abortion views.

Because the "Religious Right" divorces politics from the church's mission and fails to reckon with the intrinsically political character of the gospel, it can offer no sustained challenge to the Enlightenments' program of privatization. Indeed, the "Religious Right" has been too quick to comply with post-Enlightenment political philosophy. The "Religious Right" errs in thinking America somehow intrinsically belongs to "us," to evangelical Christians. Thus, it continues to take an "us versus them" approach to the so-called culture wars, rather than an "us-serving-them" approach. The result is that the "Religious Right" appears to be more interested in throwing rocks at the secular culture than reaching that culture with the humble, sacrificial love of Christ. But if leadership comes through service, it's hard to see how the "Religious Right" movement will ever accomplish much.

The political program of the "religious Right" isn't really explicitly Christian and does not grow out of the church's mission or ministries; instead it promotes a bland "traditional values" platform. The movement does not view the church as intrinsically political, especially in her liturgy, sacraments, preaching, discipline, hospitality, etc. It does not view the Bible as a political, covenantal book. Rather, for the "Religious Right," the only way to act "politically" in the world is to lobby, organize voters, promote candidates, march on Washington, write letters to the editor, and so on. In this model, politics has to be "tacked on" to preaching, baptism, and the Eucharist since these are viewed as intrinsically private acts rather than public. The only "political weapons" in the arsenal are identical to those used by the secularists. We'll return to these thoughts in the next section to unfold more fully what we mean by the political nature of the church.

The Church's Political Vocabulary and Political Practices

We have just noted above that the New Testament's "gospel" language functions not merely at the level of personal salvation, but also at the level of the political and the public as well. Evangelism is a *political* activity. The claim "Jesus is Lord" was a direct assault on Caesar's idolatrous pretensions. If Jesus is the world's true king, Caesar's kingship can be nothing more than a shallow parody. Martin Lloyd-Jones pointed out that we haven't really preached the gospel to someone unless they ask us the question of Romans 6:"Are you saying that because I'm justified by grace, I can live in sin?" Likewise, we can say we haven't preached the gospel to an unbeliever unless he says back to us "You're preaching another king – Jesus!" Evangelism is not just about offering "personal" salvation or a new religious experience. It's about announcing the world's new king and calling people to faithful submission.

As we declare this gospel, and summon people into the new kingdom, we find that God does marvelous and miraculous things. The lion is set loose. Think of Luther's quip: "See how much he has done through me even though I just prayed and preached. The Word did it all . . . [W]hile I sat still and drank beer with Philip in Hahnsdorf, God dealt the papacy a mighty blow." When we announce the crucified one is now Lord of all, history shoots off in new directions. Culture is transformed. Society is recreated. The mere preaching of the gospel – if we really got it right – would be enough to cast down the strongholds of secularism (2 Cor. 10:4-11).

Preaching is thoroughly political. It shapes and reshapes the world. It directs the course of history. Herman Melville recognized this when he called the pulpit the "prow of culture." But other Christian practices are political as well. Indeed the entire life of the church has a political texture to it.

Take prayer as another example. We don't need to "add" politics to prayer in order to make it "public." Instead we need to realize how politically potent prayer already is. Biblically speaking, prayer is the primary way God brings radical change in the public square. If we want to change our society, we shouldn't bother marching on Washington. Instead we should (to quote Hauerwas) "pray like hell" – and then watch what God does.

Prayer is intensely political because it is supplication offered before the *throne* of grace. We may be excluded from places of political power on earth. We may not hold prominent positions in government. We may not be cabinet members, with access to the oval office.

But we have something better than all these things. We are bride of Christ. And if Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, then that makes the church Queen of queens. We have power in the world because our divine husband, the one who rules over all things in heaven and earth, consults with us and hears us. As a good husband, he listens to his bride.

Or, to use a different biblical image, we are members of God's prophetic counsel. In Genesis 18, God took "advice" from his "friend" Abraham. Look at how he consulted with the likes of Moses, and Amos. In the same way, he now he takes counsel with his all people. There is tremendous power in corporate prayer. We are members of the heavenly cabinet with access to the oval office of the universe, the cosmic Most Holy Place.[44]

Prayer, thus, directs the course of history. Through the prayers of the saints, God causes empires to rise and fall, battles to be won and lost, rulers to come and go, pieces of legislation to pass and fail. While prayer's power should be understood in terms of, rather than in conflict with, God's ultimate sovereignty, we need to also do justice to the way prayer actually shapes God's action in history.[45]

The church herself is described in highly political terminology in the New Testament. The church is called a "kingdom" (Rev. 1:5) and a "royal priesthood" (1 Pt. 2:4-10). The word for "church" in the Greek is *ekklesia* and was used in the ancient Greco-Roman world to describe political assemblies, such as town meetings. But if the Christian assembly is now regarded as an *ekklesia*, that means the Christians are implicitly claiming to be the real rulers of the world. They rule in a different way, to be sure -- through prayer, service, evangelism, and so forth -- but it is rule nonetheless.

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[44] Peter Leithart speaks of the "throne of grace" as the "cosmic bridge." See *The Kingdom and the Power*, 98.

[45] The best discussion of this is probably John Frame, No Other God. Prayer's efficacy is not found at the level of God's decree or plan, which was settled before the foundation of the world. But God's plan includes the prayers of his people. Prayer interacts with God's will at the level of covenantal immanence. There is much mystery here, but we dare not rule out the efficacy of prayer if we are to be true to God's whole counsel.

Further, the term *leitourgoi,* from which we get the word "liturgy" was used to describe public works done for the common good, either by the Caesar for the people or by the people for Casear. Caesar's provision of public entertainment was a called a "liturgy." If a man served in the Roman army at his own expense he had performed a liturgical act. If a wealthy benefactor constructed a road for public use, he had performed a "liturgical" function. And so forth. By describing their worship assemblies as liturgies (e.g., Acts 13:2), they were claiming [a] that Jesus was publicly serving them in the
liturgy of the assembly; and [b] they were in turn serving Jesus and the world through their liturgical responses.

None of this means the Christians were revolutionaries. Far from it. Jesus (particularly in the Sermon on the Mount) called on Israel to continue to pursue the peace plan outlined by Jeremiah (29:7) rather than "zeal." Acts presents the early Christians as model citizens on earth precisely because they have a higher citizenship. But the NT also makes clear the structures of the old creation were going to have to come grips with God's new act through Christ in history. And thus, upheaval in both Rome and Israel was
inevitable (e.g., Acts 19-21). The Christians were both submissive and subversive: Obedient rebels, you might say. Thus, Augustine could legitimately argue the rise of the church was not the cause of the downfall of Rome, while in another sense the church most certainly did cause Rome's collapse because after the gospel was injected into the culture's life stream, the old gods and old myths could no longer hold the social order together.

A lot of the church's enemies have better understood the 'poltical' nature of the church and worship than Christians have. So, for example, as we have already noted, Rousseau believed inter-communion among churches was a grave threat to the state because it reminded Christians that true catholicity and community are found
in the church, not the nation or empire. The shared table relativized political loyalities with a eucharistic counter-politics that was both local and global simultaneously. John Locke excluded Roman Catholics from his religious toleration program for Great Britain because Romanists still had a trans-national loyalty to their church and the pope, and therefore couldn't be expected to be good citizens in the newly created social contract state. They couldn't be expected to act with religious neutrality in the public square.

The early Christians are a good example of the church's 'alternative politics" at work. They had no direct political leverage in the sense that they were highly marginalized socially and culturally. Yet, they were still able to act as a subversive, transforming presence within the empire, ultimately bringing it to its knees before Jesus. They accomplished this astounding (political!) coup simply by being the church -- preaching and confessing Jesus is Lord, enrolling in the militia Christi in baptism, regularly manifesting the church as the new and true humanity at the Lord's table, dying for the life of the world in mercy ministry (the Emperor Julian noted the Christians not only cared for their own poor, but also for the pagan poor better than the empire did!), showing hospitality, binding and loosing people in church discipline to maintain the integrity of the community, and so forth. This is

the church's "political agenda" properly
conceived. But it is certainly not the agenda of today's "Religious Right," which is still trying to elbow its way to a "place at the table." We already have a much better table to feast from, and have no need to try to gobble up whatever crumbs the Republicans and Democrats happen to let fall to us. As the last vestiges of Christendom wither away, we will find it more and more necessary to adopt the posture vis-à-vis America that the early Christians adopted vis-à-vis Rome. Unfortunately, the "Religious Right" seems ill prepared to do this kind of thing, and the end result could be tragic.

By the way, I would say we could adopt this basic posture of a "political church" and still have a lot of open ended questions about particular pieces of legislation. Even if we were able to establish another Christendom -- a social order in which the state recognizes the claims of Jesus Christ and the centrality of the church – not all every political policy questions would be answered. Even if we arrived at a situation in which the state was once again attentive to the mission and ministry of the church, there would still be questions about economic policy, foreign policy, immigration, welfare, etc. that would need to be dealt with by Christian statesmen. To answer those sorts of questions, we must glean wisdom from Scripture and the Christian tradition. Those things aren't always as clear cut as we would like them to be.

Conclusion: Repenting of Our Heretical Ecclesiology

We have examined some of the problems endemic to church and culture in the United States. The church and gospel have been privatized by Enlightenment dualism. We have also sketched the basic contours of a solution: the church must recover her unique and public identity as the new Israel, proclaiming Jesus as Lord and enacting his lordship inc concrete ways in liturgy and service. While it is easy to find the faults in medieval Christendom, we must keep Christian civilization in view as the goal. God will be satisfied with nothing less than a saved, glorified world; neither can we. The Bible gives us hope, through its eschatological promises, and it gives us direction, through its blueprint for life in the covenant community. It's high time we claimed the promises and enacted the vision.