

Thinking about religious and secular authority at election times.
The place of religious and secular authority in modern democratic society.

Election Day Panel (11/4/2008)
 InterVarsity-Carnegie Mellon University's Undergraduate Large Group

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It is good to be back with you on Election Day. In order to cast my vote, I brought a notarized letter to the Lancaster County (PA) Election Board/Registration Commission to secure an absentee ballot. But not just any absentee ballot, an emergency absentee ballot due to the last minute nature of my travel plans to be with you this evening.

While casting my ballot with several others, a man dressed in plain clothes, who I assumed to be Amish, tried to have his voter registration reinstated to no avail as he had been cleared from the rolls after 5 years of inactivity. He was instructed to register again in order to vote in the next election. I also witnessed an upset Millersville College student, who claimed to have registered on campus, but never received confirmation. She was not in the system and unable to vote. The desk attendants emphasized to her the importance of registering at the office or through the U.S. Postal Service versus mass registration events which frequently loose information. As I considered the referendums, an elderly couple swore to the notary that they didn't know of their Election Day trip before the regular absentee ballot deadline and they too received emergency absentee ballots.

Was it worth the extra effort to cast my vote? Why didn't I take the attitude of my young car mechanic who was overwhelmed by what I would term *yellow journalism* and choose to sit out yet another election?

One might give a sociological explanation of my sense of responsibility to the American electoral process. I was born and raised in an era of national triumph spilling over from the celebration of our bicentennial, *Reaganomics*, and the victory in the Cold War. All of these unique moments received attention in the media, my educational environments, and my rural Presbyterian congregation. No doubt my conservative Grove City College (www.gcc.edu) education reinforced my commitment to the common good of our society, particularly as the President during my time at *the Grove* (1992-1996) emphasized today's American's Liberal Democracy at *The End of History*.¹

But the follower of Christ's engagement in the modern democratic society is more than a sense of civic responsibility to a form of government which burst forth from the Protestant Reformation; it is a hope in the redemptive work of God informed by a vision of the City of God which spans the whole Biblical story.² As you know, this begins with the creation of Adam and Eve in the image of God to rule over the earth and to be fruitful and increase in number, filling the earth and subduing it. They and their descendents were to graciously rule over and bless all the creatures, plants, fields, rivers, valleys, etc (Genesis 1:26-2:1). Instead Adam and Eve choose their own direction, thereby breaking, distorting the image of God (i.e., the fall). As such, we have

¹ One book of particular interest at the time was Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992), <http://books.google.com/books?id=NdFpQwKfX2IC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+End+of+History+and+the+Last+Man&ei=yEQSSdbVB5WKyQTOIIxYDw&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html> For more check out these two author interviews: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/160040> and <http://www.newsweek.com/id/61019?tid=relatedcl>.

² St. Augustine (354 - 430), *The City of God*. Note: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.html> provides full translation of by Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D.

countless sources to read of the messiness in relationships, culture, and the earth as a whole through the generations.

But we have the promises of a new day given in passages such as

Malachi 4:1-5

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing and in its wings. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty. “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I give him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

Micah 6:8

“He has shown all you people [i.e., Israel] what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Isaiah (note: just a sampling)

The mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many people shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths (2:2)

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. ... For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel because he has glorified you. ... Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nation shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession. ... The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify where my feet rest (Is 60:6-7, 9, 11, 13)

All of which comes to completeness in our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whom we read in Colossians 1:15-16

Is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

And in a new heavens and the new earth recorded in [Revelation 21-22](#), note the similarity to the [Isaiah 60](#) passage as the kings coming marching in to offer their treasures to the Lord God Almighty.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things had passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5a)

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:22-27).

Note: Two other passages to mention regarding the government of the coming Kingdom include [Isaiah 11](#) (v.6-9 depict the *Peaceable Kingdom*, a utopian vision for many found in v.6-9) and [Daniel 7:13-14](#) (Ancient of Days).

Now before I advocate *Culture-Making*³, let me note that followers of Christ have taken a number of positions with regard to secular authority. Having been born and raised in Lancaster County, I am surrounded by many who reject secular authority and popular culture in general. For what has the Kingdom of God have to do with the kingdom of this world? Proponents of *Christ against Culture* take passages such as [1 John 2:15-16](#) to generally apply to all aspects of human society.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. ... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.

Others I have met along the way accept the democratic society the way it is, no questions asked. Still others, including some friends from Grove City College, place the Church above democratic society and argue that the Kingdom of God/Church should tell the government how to work, receive deference from government, or even run the government by returning our nation to its *Christian roots*. Lastly, I've found more and more of my friends frustrated at the paradoxical relationship between following Christ and participating in a modern democratic society. One's not sure where they'll be found them on the spectrum on a given topic on any particular day because they do not have a foundation from which to critique or a direction for change/hope. Some have given up and chosen to remove themselves from the process, to live on their own or among others with similar interests.

Instead of arguing against various positions of Christ & Culture⁴, let me give you an outline of my thoughts on culture-making in relationship to government:

1. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Furthermore, we are called to love our neighbor as ourself.⁵ All of life is to be creatively, joyfully, and worshipfully offered back to the Creator in the context of the complexly and beautifully ordered creation. A significant part of our expression of the reality of our love to God is the practical nature of loving our neighbor and the state provides structures for being a

³ Visit <http://www.culture-making.com/> for more.

⁴ Visit <http://books.google.com/books?id=uLrCHQAACAAJ&dq=christ+and+culture&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html> for the classic piece by H. Richard Niebuhr.

⁵ [Deuteronomy 6:1-9](#), [Leviticus 19:18](#), [Matthew 22:24-30](#)

- blessing by supporting justice in God's world. Paul Marshall defines justice as *giving something its right, its created place in God's world* (quoted by David T. Koyzis in *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey of Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, p.252, 259).⁶
2. Would government exist even without the brokenness caused by Adam and Eve's choice of willful disobedience? Now this is controversial, but my answer is *Yes*. Why? Government provides structure for the creative and healthy interaction of the various spheres of the Creation, e.g., creation care (remember naming of the animals in Genesis 2:19), marriage, family, school, business, guilds, arts parties (way to go Sheila!). But without the fall? As we live in the reality of the fall, it is difficult to envision how this would look except to say that God would rule over the structures as they serve Him to the blessing of all of creation. In addition, no use of force to suppress evil in the process of culture formation would not be necessary, except in restraining or resisting external evil influences/beings. So I'm asserting that government is not optional, even in the Garden of Eden at the beginning and the end of time. The various Utopian visions, both within and outside of the Church, fail to take into account the deep brokenness caused by the fall and the presence of evil across the layers of being, identity, and reality. My development of this perspective has been encouraged by *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (H. Henry Meeter, revised by Paul A. Marshall. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990, pp. 77-90)⁷ and C.S. Lewis' *Ransom Trilogy*, referred to some as *The Space Trilogy*.⁸ This requires more thought, would love your feedback.
 3. Right relationships between the various aspects of cultural/social order and those involved is part of the daily routine. *Jim Skillin has pointed out, 'Politics is not something done in a moment of passion with a simple moral zealousness. Politics is more like raising a family, or running a business, or stewarding a farm. It requires lifelong commitment, patience, steadiness, and great attention to detail day after day.'* – Paul Marshall with Lela Gilbert in *Heaven Is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God's Creation* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, p.149). To change government through the political process, as other aspects of culture, demands the creative generation of more of it with better structure and direction. Remember the call of Abraham in [Genesis 12:1-3](#) to father a great nation to be a blessing to all the families of the earth? In addition to the nation of Israel, Old Testament figures such Joseph and Daniel were a blessing to where they had been sent, even in exile.
 - a. When I raised questions regarding the expansion of a landfill about 1.5 miles from my house. I did not denounce the project, instead I
 - i. Connected with other concerned citizens through quasi-educational mobilizing events.
 - ii. Regularly attended and gave comments at public meetings on the topic. Note: Some comments even reached the local newspaper giving more exposure to our concerns.
 - iii. When making comments, I underscored my health and safety concerns for our kids with the speed limit violations and the debris coming out of the construction waste trucks on our road traveling to the landfill. This involved speaking at the Township Meetings and Regional Police Force Meetings. As a result, police periodically monitor our road to enforce the 35 MPH speed limit. Furthermore, the trucks now are all covered (so construction waste is no longer periodically spilled along our road and into our yard) and for the most part obey the speed limit, if they choose to go past our house.

⁶ <http://books.google.com/books?id=4eIGv0rz-u4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Political+Visions+%26+Illusions:++A+Survey+of+Christian+Critique+of+Contemporary+Ideologies&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html>

⁷ <http://books.google.com/books?id=h8uRAAAACAAJ&dq=The+Basic+Ideas+of+Calvinism&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Trilogy

- iv. Emphasized increased recycling in our township to decrease the waste stream and take advantage of renewable resources for future generations. As part of this concern, I researched the matter by attending a recycling conference, connecting with County and PA resource people, and visiting the new Lancaster County Solid Waste Management Facility. These efforts led to conversations between our Township and County. In addition, materials generated by this process unearthed local avenues for additional recycling beyond our Township's system and helpful resources for a friend who is leading an adult elective on Creation Care at our local congregation.
 - b. Yes, the landfill expanded. Similar to my father's loss in a critique of the construction of an incinerator in the rolling farms of Lancaster (note: which was a more drawn out and culture-making process), the conversations, controls, and additional steps came about only because of the public involvement. Yes, it took time and creative energy, placing demands on time, family, the neighborhood, etc, and it's not entirely wrapped up in the short term or the long term. Two of the most memorable moments include:
 - i. Speaking with another family member at the Regional Police Force Meeting and receiving confirmation that our concerns were being listened to and being acted upon. Note: a police car had a visible presence on our road for some time in order to monitor traffic and the trash truckers (not to mention some other motorists) are keenly aware of their periodic continued presence.
 - ii. Being encouraged in my efforts by a pastor's wife at our local congregation and knowing others in our local congregation had similar Creation Care concerns, such as those which led to the development of the current adult elective on the topic.
 - c. We must become engaged on the local level with local and larger concerns, e.g., voting today, the upcoming Justice dinner at CMU, in my community the plans to expand public school district facilities. ...
4. What about political authority in specific, *Political authority is the right possessed by the government to exercise power over those subject to it, including citizens and resident noncitizens. To some degree such authority is shared with citizens as members of the state or body politic insofar as they have, in a democracy, the right to vote, to stand for public office and to speak out freely on the issues of the day* (David T. Koyzis in *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey of Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, p.248). In our political structure, we each have some responsibility to serve and even to properly use cultural power, i.e., the ability to successfully propose a new cultural good, in order to maintain a proper relationship between the 2 kingdoms, civil righteousness, promote general peace and tranquility. But we never quite know how much power we have, except to say that we never have *enough* to do it all no matter our position in society. And that is a good thing ;-)
 5. Coming back to the issue of living in a fallen world, aren't we led to question all non-Christian authority and use of power? Have you noticed we're not at a Christian college? Why? Because this is where to learn engineering, technology, the arts, history, and Japanese to name a few fields. Even more you learn to speak competently regarding numerous concerns from across our globe, not the least being justice and creational care concerns. How can this be? The grace of God extends into the common aspects of human culture and life. The Light of Christ informs how we might redemptively use already present gifts. But even with followers of Christ in positions of power, the Kingdom of God will not come in completeness until the return of Christ and the new heavens and the new earth.
 6. But should we really submit when earthly powers go astray? Yes, even if this leads to death as it did in the case our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and many of his disciples throughout the history of the Church, not to mention the Old Testament saints recounted

in Hebrews 11.⁹ We are not to compromise the Word and Life of God, no matter the cost. We are to go with the Jews to the concentration camp. *The Cost of Discipleship* is transformative not only in the big moments of life, but the little ones such as the long line my host, a 1958 Carnegie Tech alum with years of involvement with InterVarsity, who stood in line to vote this morning.¹⁰ Although he volunteered at the polls for a number of years, he only recognized four. He voted 99. His wife went later and cast ballot 162. According to the alum, *to have six in line is a long line for us*. A Pitt faculty shared with me this morning that there were nine machines covering two precincts in his voting location and each were ten deep with voters.

- a. With regard to voting Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert comment, *However, messy as it is, the alternative to vote grubbing and opinion shaping is authoritarianism or totalitarianism. The chaotic nature of elections and politics is typical of how all democratic societies are run. If we take seriously the divine authority of being doers of justice, stewards of political power, and responsible to the people, we must take "politics" seriously. Often the compromising and trimming nature of politics is summarized in the true cliché that "politics is the art of the possible." A useful expansion of this was given by French President Jacques Chirac: "Politics is not the art of the possible, but the art of making possible what is necessary." Perhaps as Christians we should expand this to: "Politics is the art of gaining support and making possible that which is right." As Christians we are called to enter into this frustrating and freeing, exhausting and exhilarating struggle to make possible what is right.* – Paul Marshall with Lela Gilbert in *Heaven Is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God's Creation* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, p.148).
 - b. John Piper recently wrote a piece entitled, *Let Christians Vote as Though They Were Not Voting*¹¹ in which he placed an emphasis on not finding our identity, joy, hope, in the *present form of this world* as it is *passing away* ([I Corinthians 7:29-31](#)) but instead in the One whose will *abides forever* ([I John 2:17](#)).
7. May we serve Christ by
- a. Electing those who will seek to administer justice and promote the general welfare of the state and its citizens, thereby falling properly under the rule of God. And pray for discernment to not elect those who focus upon their own concerns to the expense of justice and the general welfare of the state which will lead us further broken-ness and the judgment of God.
 - b. Giving esteem and praying for those whom we have chosen and he has ordained to rule over us as we read in a number of passages including [I Peter 2:13-14](#), [Titus 3:1](#), [II Peter 2:10](#), [Jude 8](#). Rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's ([Mark 12:13-17](#)), i.e., being obedient in all lawful things as we read in [Romans 13](#), also see [Titus 3:1](#), [I Peter 2:13-14](#), [I Timothy 2:1-3](#). Note: I provided some prayer guides developed by InterVarsity Pitt alum, if you're looking for materials visit <http://www.prayforpittsburgh.org> and drop the network an email.
 - c. Taking part in the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* You are Christ as individuals, small groups, a large group, those connected with the people of God in 'da Burgh, in Lancaster County, from sea to shining sea, across the globe across time and space. As with other aspects of culture-making, significant political engagement begins with small groups of conversation which extend into larger spheres. Do you have a group of 3 with

⁹ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%2011;&version=31;>

¹⁰ <http://books.google.com/books?id=GKA2DyNY2H0C&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html>

¹¹ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TasteAndSee/ByDate/2008/3347_Let_Christians_Vote_As_Though_They_Were_Not_Voting/

whom who pray and consider these matters before extending conversation to 12, 120. ... Here's some culture-making questions with relevance to our topic:

- i. *What is God doing in culture? What is his vision for the horizons of the possible and the impossible? Who are the poor who are having good news preached to them? Who are the powerful who are called to spend their power alongside the relatively powerless? Where is the impossible becoming possible?* (Andy Crouch in *Culture-Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p.214).¹²
- ii. Jesus has called us to be *leaven in a lump of dough* (Mt 13:33), *salt* (Mt 5:13), and *the light of the world, a city set on a hill that cannot be hid* (Mt 5:14). Augustine stated our call in this manner, *Everything, and not least political life, is subject to the great conversion that ensues when God makes a new beginning for man by causing man to being with God.*
- d. But keeping in mind that we are pilgrims on this earth. At times the people of God will live in deep exile in their culture, like Daniel, Joseph, Jesus, followers of Christ in Orissa, India today and at other times sense utopia just around the corner we must never forget that no matter how much we invest in the creative Christ-centered culture-making political process, *our Lord and God alone is worthy to receive glory and honor and power, for He created all things, and by His will they exist and were created* (Rev 4:11). Amen!

¹² <http://www.culture-making.com/>