

The Early Church and Politics
a.k.a. “A Political Theology of the Old and New Testaments”
Tim Mackie, PhD. Professor of Biblical Studies at Western Seminary, Portland, OR

1. God is the creator and ruler of all creation (Genesis 1)

- A. God’s rule over his world *is mediated through his image — humanity*: Genesis 1:26-28
- B. Humanity rebels and declares independence to define good and evil on their own terms (Genesis 3) which sets the downward spiral leading to Babylon (Genesis 11)
- C. Egypt becomes the first corrupt superpower, who rebellion is depicted as a failure to acknowledge the God of Israel as the creator and redeemer (Exodus 1-2, 5:1-3)

2. The plot tension driving the Hebrew Bible:

- A. The Jewish claim about God and politics:
 - The God of Israel is the Creator and King of all nations: Psalm 33
 - Israel is to offer allegiance to one God alone: The *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-6
- B. The Great Tension:
 - *The Problem*: The nations don’t recognize their true King and their rebellion results in violence and injustice (Babylon, Egypt, etc.: Psalm 2)
 - *The Solution*: God will appoint a king to bring God’s rule over the nations (Psalm 2; Isaiah 11)
 - *The Commission*
 - Serve God by honoring whatever king is in charge (see Jeremiah 29:1-7)
 - If obedience to the king requires disloyalty to God, then (1) remind the king that God is their true King (the prophetic critique), and (2) willingly suffer the consequences (see Daniel 1-7).

3. The perspective of the Gospels and Acts:

- A. Jesus’ main message was that God’s rule over the nations had arrived, in himself:
 - Jesus is the messianic king who will bring God’s rule and blessing to the nations (Matthew 1)
 - Jesus announced that God’s heavenly rule was here (Matthew 4:17, 23; see Mark 1:14-15)
 - Jesus’ teaching was his manifesto of an upside-down kingdom (= Sermon on the Mt., Matthew 5-7)
 - Jesus’ death was his enthronement as the Passover Lamb who loved and died for his enemies (Matthew 26-27)
 - Jesus is now the risen king of all nations who are called to live under his rule (Matthew 28:18-20)
 - The large narrative arc from Genesis 1 is complete: We now have a human who bears God’s image and rule perfectly, but not all the nations recognize the Messiah’s rule.
- B. Jesus commissioned his followers to announce that God’s kingdom has arrived in Jesus
 - Acts 1:3-8: The commission to go out to all the nations
 - Acts 13-20: The Tale of Two Kingdoms
 - *Philippi* (16:11-40): The accusation in 16:19-20: Promoting unlawful customs for Romans
 - *Thessalonica* (17:1-9): The accusation in 17:6-7: Treason and sedition by promoting another king
 - *Athens* (17:16-34): The accusation in 17:18-20: Promoting new gods
 - *Corinth* (18:1-28): The accusation in 18:12-13: Promoting unlawful worship
 - *Ephesus* (19:1-41): The accusation in 19:25-27: Endangering the economy and offending the gods

- Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*: “Early Christianity lacked any of the things that typically comprised “religion” in the Roman world: no shrines or temple, therefore no statues of the deity, no altar, no sacrifices, and no priesthood. This was totally bizarre in a culture saturated with temples and gods; to deny the gods of worship was effectively to deny their reality. The withdrawal of new converted Christians from the ubiquitous veneration of the gods in public and family environments was seen as abrupt, arbitrary, unjustified and deeply worrying. All of these gods governed various arenas of human life, and one’s family, city and national gods were guardians against plague, fire, and disaster. Refusal to participate in their worship would have been taken as disloyalty to one’s family, city, and as disregard for the welfare of one’s neighbors.”
- See Governor Pliny’s letter to Trajan about the “depraved superstition” of the Christians.
- Acts 22-28: Paul allows himself to be arrested unfairly and endures ridiculously delayed trials that are rigged. Paul knows the inside of the Roman justice system
- Acts 28:23-31: Paul is willingly under house arrest, announcing God’s rule *in Rome* (see Romans 1:1-6: Good news, God’s rule, Son of God, resurrection, king of the nations, universal obedience).

4. The Perspective of Paul’s Letters

A. Letter to the Philippians: A Theology of dual citizenship

- 1:27 “*conduct yourselves* in a manner worthy of the good news about the Messiah” = Greek *politeuo* “live as citizens”
- 2:5-11: The Messianic Mindset: self-giving love for the well-being of another
- 3:20-21: “our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a savior from there” = Greek *politeuma* “our identity as citizens”

B. Letter to Timothy: 1 Timothy 2:1-4: Pray and seek the well-being of the leaders (Nero?!)

C. Letter to the Romans

- The Backstory:
 - The Jewish community in Rome was a traumatized and vulnerable minority:
 - In 19 A.D. Emperor Tiberius exiled a few thousand Jewish people to Sardinia for having too much popular influence in Rome (see Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85.4).
 - In 49 A.D. Emperor Claudius expelled some 30,000 Jews from Rome. Why? The only reason surviving in Roman annals is Suetonius official account: “Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus’ (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars: Claudius*, ch. 25).
 - There would immense temptation for Gentile Christians to look down upon and ostracize Jewish Christians and for the congregations to become segregated.
- Romans 1-11: Jews and Gentiles are now one new family in the Messiah
- Romans 12-13
 - Paul designed this section in a symmetrical pattern:

A	13:1-2	New mindset for a new age
B	12:3-13	Love sustains the Unity of Jesus’ family
C	12:14-21	Christians before hostile neighbors
C	13:1-7	Christians before the ruling powers
B	13:8-10	Love fulfills the Torah in Jesus’ family

- Select notes on Romans 12-13:
 - 12:1 “y’all present your bodies (plural) as a living sacrifice (singular)”: instead of offerings to the many gods and the Roman imperial goddess (*dea Roma*), Christians collectively offer their communal life as an offering to God.
 - 12:2 “The pattern of *this world*” (Greek: *aion* = “age, eon, period of world history) VS. “the *renewal* of your mind” (Greek: *anakaino* = renew, same word used in Colossians 3:10-11)
 - 12:3-13: The many are one body: the Spirit empowers people to use their diverse talents to serve others in love.
 - 12:17-21: The church’s response to hostility: don’t seek vigilante justice or revenge, “leave room for God’s wrath”... respond to evil with good.
 - 13:1: “no authority except what has been appointed by God”
 - To say this of a regime who exalted the Emperor as divine and deified their Empire (*dea Roma*) this is a clear jab at Roman propaganda.
 - Underlying this is Paul’s deeply Jewish conviction that the God of Israel is alone king of the nations. This would be deeply offensive to Greeks and Romans
 - Daniel 4:17: The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.’
 - 13:4 “the one in authority is the servant of God”: a clear reference to Jeremiah 25:9 and 27:5-8 that referred to Nebuchadnezzar as “God’s servant.” *NOTE: This was not an endorsement of everything this ruler/state did. As Habakkuk protested God’s appointment of Babylon, he learned that God’s justice would hold Babylon accountable too.
 - 13:4 “rulers do not bear the sword in vain, it is God’s servant for vengeance.” A direct connection back to 12:19
 - Crucial connection between Romans 12:19 & 13:4**
 - 12:19: Don’t avenge, leave it to God. *The community of Jesus overcomes evil with good.*
 - 13:4: The state’s sword is God’s vengeance. *The state overcomes evil with the sword.*
 - 13:8-10: Love is the meaning of life and the fulfillment of the Torah. Here Paul is quoting Jesus’ teaching about the greatest commandment (see Matthew 22:34-40).

5. The Revelation

- A. All human kingdoms eventually become “Babylon” and will come under God’s justice (Revelation chs. 13, 17-18)
- B. Only the marriage of heaven and earth and the complete arrival of God’s kingdom will solve the corruption inherent in human kingdoms.

6. Some Open-ended conclusions...

- A. The Bible does not offer divine endorsement for any particular political form of organized government. Multiple types of government can honor God’s purposes to rule the world through humans.
- B. A Christian grounds their true identity as a human bearing God’s image and as a child of God in the multi-ethnic, international family of Jesus.

- C. A Christian's ultimately loyalty is to the risen king Jesus who is the true Lord over all the nations.
- Jesus' family is a "political" body (Grk. *polis* = city of gathered people who share a common life) whose way of life is shaped by the kingdom teachings of Jesus (see Matthew 5-7)
 - The kingdom ethic is love: to seek the well-being of others above my own (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 Thessalonians 3:12 and 5:15; Romans 12:17)
- D. Dual citizenship in the kingdom of God and human kingdoms
- Christians find themselves in diverse families, nations, and social location which also shape their unique identity. This is part of God's "calling" (1 Corinthians 7:17-24).
 - They are called to honor the structures of authority because they are an expression of God's authority to promote and sustain good in the world (Genesis 1, Romans 13)
 - If God's people have the opportunity to participate in those authority structures they are called to leverage them for the well-being of their community and for God's kingdom (Joseph in Egypt, Esther in Persia, Daniel in Babylon; see Romans 12:17)
 - When those authority structures become corrupt and do not sustain the good, God's people are called to non-violent resistance and prophetic critique (Daniel).
 - When those authority structures demand a loyalty that compromises their allegiance to Jesus, they are to humbly disobey and accept the consequences ("we must obey God rather than humans", Peter in Acts 5:29)

For further reading:

- Gordon McConnville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology*.
- Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*.
- Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics*.
- P.C. Kemeny (editor), *Church, State, and Public Justice: Five Views*.
- Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Jesus Should Serve the Common Good*.