

The Bible and the State: towards a response to James W. Skillen

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Dr Skillen's paper is a welcome reminder that the Church continues to require faithful and clear minds and voices to wrestle with and articulate in a changing landscape its relationship with civil society. It is good to be reminded that Bible study never occurs in a political and social vacuum. It is good to be reminded that God's decision to be with and for creation is more encompassing than God's decision to be creation's Saviour. It is good, too, to have our attention drawn again to the fact that the call of Christ is inherently a political one – one that moves us into, and not away from, worldly engagement, and into the very love of Christ which constrains us to contribute in whatever ways possible (in the gospel) towards the welfare of the city. I appreciate the theological instincts which see the divine fount of all blessing graciously desiring the flourishing of human life and what Skillen refers to as a 'healthy public commons', a witness to that eminently gospel note that God does not will that the world go to the dogs.

I have written elsewhere¹ in support of the Church's positive contribution to civic life, a contribution which acknowledges the State as 'an ordained power',² and which affirms public service and even the dignity of political office which, 'though frequently demeaned, remains a gift and a calling of God'.³ Certainly, I have no qualms with the Reformed instinct to perceive *both* the law *and* the gospel as expressions of divine grace.⁴ However, I am less certain about the claim that there is nothing about the responsibilities of government that is 'incompatible with Christian subservience to, and service of, Jesus Christ', particularly if such responsibilities are defined along the lines that Skillen draws. I understand such a claim to be problematic on a number of fronts. For example, while some may wish to argue that the State has no recourse other than to use or threaten to use violence in order to put its insights into practice, when it is true to its calling the Christian community operates 'without human force and by God's Word alone'.⁵ While much recent public theology assumes the given-ness of the current political arrangements and tries to accommodate itself to them, responsible public theology is not called to accommodate the gospel to the claims and pretensions of the Nation-State. Nor is it called to align itself unthinkingly with the criticisms of the present order. Rather, public theology must judge each proposal for ordering public life according to its merits and seek to bring the untamed and liberating Word of God to bear. So John de Gruchy: 'Creative infidelity and sterile fidelity ultimately amount to the same thing – a failure to hear the liberating and life-giving Word in relation to our own historical context'.⁶

¹ Jason A. Goroncy, 'Church and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition: An Old Relationship and a New Communion', *Reformed World* 61, no. 3 (2011), 195–210.

² Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 138.

³ David Fergusson, 'Church, State, and Civil Society in the Reformed Tradition' in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity* (ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 126.

⁴ See Eberhard Busch, 'Church and Politics in the Reformed Tradition' in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 180–95.

⁵ The Augsburg Confession, 28.

⁶ John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids/Cape Town: Wm. B. Eerdmans/David Philip Publishers, 1991), 73.

When a government's responsibility is grounded in an ethic of creation and is also concerned 'to exercise retributive justice', as Skillen suggests, then this highlights, to my mind, not only how undetermined from christological control such a presentation is, but also how it neglects to underline the apocalyptic and counter-natural nature of the body of Christ, a community which is the fruit not of God's retributive justice or of human decision but rather of God's loving election of humanity in Christ, made concrete in the forgiveness of sins. I am not suggesting that there exists no ambiguity in the Bible's accounts of divine satisfaction. Nor am I suggesting that such ambiguities are strange to Skillen's presentation. But the post-Constantinian and neo-Kuyperian tendency to politicise sacrificial themes using texts which (mostly?) served as *protests* against judicial cruelty were employed to *validate* such practice is both a profound example of the seductive nature of the powers and authorities at work in our world, and a blight on the very community called by God to embody the politic and practices of the new creation. One scandalous implication of this is that the very community which is supposed not to be conformed to the world now finds itself underwriting the world's repressive practices. Deforming the biblical faith, 'the church has contributed both to the mentality in which people make war, and to vengeful attitudes towards offenders. It is this which makes the work of exegesis on the founding texts so important'.⁷

It is not sufficient, for example, to cite Deuteronomy 17.14–20 as an example of the divine will, a reading particularly favoured by those who in the past supported the policy of the divine right of kings. We would do well, firstly, to remember that for ancient Israel, 'monarchy did not, as in the myths of other Near Eastern nations, descend from heaven, but emerged, as a divine concession, for the people's rebellious desire for a king (1 Sam. 8)'.⁸ Indeed, 'monarchy was inconsistent with the early Israelite ideal of a free society of equals under the sole, liberating lordship of God'.⁹ Responsible readers of the biblical material will seek to avoid both anachronistic readings of the text and uncritical application of the *Sitz im Leben* of ancient Israel in all its covenant distinctiveness to the modern democratic Nation-State.

But even within the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, there is an important internal critique going on around these very questions. The strategy of the prophets, for example, was not to declare monarchy illegitimate so much as to 'judge it by the standard of the ideal which alone could justify it. Monarchy could be justified at all only if it served, instead of usurping and frustrating, God's own liberating rule over [God's] people', and that especially for the oppressed.¹⁰ What is clear is that, as Richard Bauckham has noted,

The Old Testament cannot be understood to prescribe a particular political system for later societies. What it does provide is a criterion for assessing all political systems and their practice: that government must be exercised on behalf of all the people, in the interests of all, and especially in the interests of those who would otherwise suffer most, the weakest and most disadvantaged, those without any social or economic power or influence.¹¹

In other words, the Hebrew Scriptures, even in their travail, envisage a system of government that gestures towards the messianic reign of One who takes the kenotic road to 'extreme

⁷ Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82. Unfortunately, space here precludes the attention to detailed exegesis that such a discussion demands and would benefit from.

⁸ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 1989), 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

solidarity with the wretched'¹² and who 'contests the authority of any political power which, like Caiaphas and Pilate, prefers expediency to justice and compassion. The king of kings did not sit in judgement with Caiaphas and Pilate, but suffered their condemnation and in doing so condemned them'.¹³

While such radical solidarity with the helpless is an impossible ideal for politicians consigned to work with the imagination of the old creation, it is nevertheless one which they may not neglect. To cite Bauckham again:

In politics the solidarity of the powerful with the powerless is effective on their behalf because the powerful remain powerful and exercise their power on behalf of the powerless. But political power can easily distance its holders from the powerless. They do not really know what it is like to be powerless, or, even if they once knew, they forget (cf. Eccles. 14.13–14). They may claim to speak for the powerless, but the powerless do not feel them to be their spokespersons. At worst, the powerless become pawns in the political power-game played by their professed spokespersons, and are all the more useful because they have no voice of their own to protest. Here Jesus' example can remind even politicians what solidarity really demands. Politicians may not, in normal circumstances, renounce power, but they must resist its distancing effect in whatever ways are open to them.¹⁴

Skillen's reading and use of Romans 13 is equally not without some difficulties. Again, the acceptable claim that the State is a 'modern invention' appears to be drastically at odds with a hermeneutic that encourages direct and somewhat private application of Scriptural texts, as if a selection of first century texts can be applied unproblematically to the modern State and its enterprises. This direct application of Scripture to the modern State is made all the more puzzling by the concluding call for 'principled pluralism' which, while it may very well be in the best interests of just political communities, is entirely out of sorts with the forms of government actually described in the biblical passages to which he appeals. For example, Deuteronomy 17 is clearly not describing anything like a democratic *politia*, so it is far from clear how this can sensibly be used to inform the kind of politics being advocated for. One is able to read Scripture in this way only by reducing Scripture's witness to a set of 'principles' that can be plucked out from the text, 'kernels' of truth that can be abstracted and generalised away from the 'husk' of the stories and songs and letters themselves and, most crucially, from the Word to which Scripture bids us look.

Here we might do well to be reminded of something that the Reformed tradition insists upon; namely that hermeneutics, whether of the Bible or of culture, is most responsibly undertaken in the context of a hermeneutical, prophetic¹⁵ and catholic community where Christians with varied cultures, conditions and experiences might alert each other to aspects of Scripture which may elude others. It is especially important that 'at a time when the most urgent political issues are the international ones affecting all parts of the world, [that] our political use of the Bible needs to reflect the thinking of the universal Church'.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 51.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 51–52.

¹⁵ On the nature of the Church as prophetic see Ernst Käsemann, *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene* (ed. Rudolf Landau and Wolfgang Kraus; trans. Roy A. Harrisville; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 291–306.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 19.

The New Testament's teaching about the State includes the detail that its being is necessarily one of complex juxtaposition. Romans 13 needs to be read in relation to the New Testament's broader concerns, contexts and texts, such as the repeated warnings against idolisation of what is good but provisional. Indeed, the provisional and legitimate authority that the State exercises is always in danger of being overreached and turned into an absolute claim at which point the Christian must issue a protest,¹⁷ even to the point of martyrdom; facts Skillen himself would no doubt concede. The provisional nature of the State as presented in the New Testament is further evident, as Oscar Cullman has observed, in both a 'chronological tension' and 'chronological dualism' which 'neither affirms nor denies the world'.¹⁸ This tension is expressed, among other ways, by the fact that while the New Testament does not call for an end to human government, it does consistently remind the Church *both* that Jesus was executed by a legitimate human government *and* that 'human governments cannot be the rule of God':

Theocratic politics, in that sense, are a dangerous illusion. A government which presumes to be the rule of God is almost bound to absolutize itself, to deny the moral ambiguities of its policies and practice, to reject criticism and to suppress dissent, and to lose its ideals in self-justifying oppression. Good government requires the recognition of fallible human limits. It requires humble remembrance of the gap between itself and the Kingdom of God.¹⁹

This is why, as Karl Barth noted, the divine command to Christians to 'be subject to the governing authorities' is not about being good citizens but is rather a call to the *priestly* service of prayer for the State and *prophetic* service in proclamation to the State that she might not pervert her 'God-given authority'.²⁰

It is insufficient to cite and then build a case on Romans 13 while avoiding the fact that the word there translated 'authority' is the same word (ἐξουσία²¹) that is employed in Revelation 13 to paint a very different picture of the capabilities of this beast called 'the State'. In Revelation 13, we are given a vision of 'the full flowering of an arrogant imperial power demanding abject obedience', setting itself up as both an alternate Christ and an alternative Christ-community. Throughout the book, we are also given a vision that confirms the New Testament's claim that the grain of the universe is finally kenotic – or self-emptying – in shape. This means that it is not those who rise up in revolutionary violence who triumph in the end but rather it is 'those who bear witness to the Lamb through the sword of God's word, it is those who are martyred who triumph over the evil empire'.²²

A parallel difficulty occurs in Skillen's use of 1 Corinthians 15.27–28 to defend the claim that governments and political communities are authorised by God to execute 'retributive judgment against sin and death'. The subsequent claim that such action 'is necessary to restore and fulfill the good order of creation' is, to my mind, strangely ironic not only because this particular text is silent on the matter of retribution *per se*, but also because St Paul makes plain just a few verses earlier that the subjecting of everything under Christ involves destroying 'every ruler and every authority and power' (1 Cor 15.24), where the

¹⁷ See Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Letters 1922–1966* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 78, 135–39.

¹⁸ Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 87, 89.

¹⁹ Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 84.

²⁰ Barth, *Community, State, and Church*, 139.

²¹ On this, see Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, 93–114.

²² Lee C. Camp, 'What About Romans 13: "Let Every Soul Be Subject"?' in *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Nonviolence* (ed. Tripp York and Justin Bronson Barringer; Eugene OR: Cascade, 2012), 149–50.

word translated ‘authority’ (ἐξουσίαν) is the same word that is used in Romans 13.3 to support the good but provisional nature of human governments ‘instituted by God’ (Rom 13.1).

Skillen’s reading of Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2 is likewise difficult to accept, although for a different reason – it fails to reckon seriously with what Hebrews actually says; i.e., that we *do not see* the realities of Psalm 8 playing out in our world! This strikes right at the heart of another theological matter; namely, a tendency to confuse the goodness of the world as it now stands with the goodness of creation as it is proleptically transfigured and prefigured in Christ alone. Only in the End, only beyond the eschatological horizon, are all things put under our feet in the way that Skillen describes. Some may wish to suggest that his is an over-realised eschatology.

Given the context in which the New Testament material was penned, and the theological convictions that motivated its authorship, there ought to be little conjecture that what the New Testament itself wishes to aver about civil authorities is both largely offensive to modern sensibilities (to be sure, it was no less offensive to ancient sensibilities!) and significantly more complex than some would have us believe. Certainly the New Testament warns us from expecting too much of civil authorities, but this is not because the New Testament encourages a cynical attitude to such authorities so much as it is a series of texts shot through with eschatological realism birthed by the servant-reign of God in Jesus Christ.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen is particularly helpful here. Barmen argued that all truth the Church could know was God’s truth, and that all God’s truth was revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Church had no right to believe or to promulgate anything that was not christological. Barmen put it thus: ‘We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God’s revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside’ Jesus Christ, who is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. Barmen made clear that the principle reason preventing the Christian community from withdrawing from the world in good faith is not because of what the Bible may or may not say about creation *per se*, but, first and foremost, because of Holy Scripture’s fundamental rejection of the docetic lie about the truly incarnate God; and, secondly, because of what the Community wishes to affirm about the free and loving and desecularising determination of the Holy Spirit who presses against those sect-like attempts to open up a rigid chasm between the (albeit genuinely) different forms of life in the world and the divine imagination. Barmen represents the task of exposition undertaken by seeking to explain how the claims and action and person of Christ impact the particular structures, questions and realities that are being addressed. It offers us a paradigm which suggests that it is not wrong for the theologian to try to criticise this or that policy, *and* that an adequate theology begins not in criticism but in constructive reflection on the classical doctrines of the Christian faith, with attention being paid to how they work out in relation to this or that pressing social question.

One pressing social and theological question recurring throughout Skillen’s paper concerns the matter of retributive justice. He depicts the role of civil authority as both encouraging those activities which serve the public good and as redressing injustice and restraining offenders for the sake of protecting the innocent and oppressed. I concur with this assessment. But in a number of places he proceeds to suggest that civil authorities fulfil this role, partly, if not principally, through exercising justice *retributively*. Such is considered ‘necessary’, he argues, because of sin: ‘Retributive judgment against sin and death’, he writes, ‘is necessary to restore and fulfill the good order of creation’. This raises a number of

questions for me: First, as I read the New Testament I am confronted with the counter-intuitive truth that the consummation of true justice is not retribution but reconciliation, and that born of truth-telling, forgiveness and hope. Is this not precisely the reality to which South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to give concrete expression and, in so doing, imagined a new future – God's new future! – for human society?²³ While there can be no question of the State being able to bring about anything like the new creation, it is within a State's authority and province to gesture more towards such than the imagination-starved vision that understands justice in retributive terms alone.

Second, I do not follow how the claims regarding the State's exercising of retributive justice is in any way consistent with the claim that 'it is not possible for a totalitarian state to be just or to do justice'. While the criteria employed for why such is required is sometimes at odds with what political communities might claim regarding other forms that justice might take,²⁴ my experience of both totalitarian and liberal democratic States is that neither have much difficulty at all with understanding justice in retributive terms.

Third, and most importantly, Jesus calls his followers to be embraced by an alternative imagination for human society where those who put their trust in God come not only 'to the aid of their neighbors', as Skillen rightly insists, but also to the aid of their enemies – even to the point of laying down one's life for one's adversary. Of course, this raises the important question about resources, and whether the State is in a position to live as the Church must. But those who venture the risk of obedience and stand exposed before the strangeness of One who calls are those who follow One who puts himself in the way of evil, who intervenes on behalf of the oppressed and the weak and the downtrodden, and who does so not with swords and spears but by bearing on his body blows and resisting retaliation. Jesus confronts the cycle of violence and declares that 'the violence stops with me'. He suffers in his own person the wrong that is done, and entrusts the outcome to God. That is the pattern of life that the baptised are called to follow. Forgiveness, compassion, prayer and sacrifice are the tools that Christ takes up in his war against evil and sin. When those who bear his name take up arms to wage war, and insist that such action is necessary and unavoidable, they are resorting to a logic other than that of the Logos incarnate.

At core, the most fundamental problem in Skillen's account, as I read it, lies in his doctrine of God, a theology proper which often floats too unmoored from the particular shape that the divine life has assumed in our world. Words like 'love' and 'justice' and 'discernment' and 'service' and 'law' are words that Christian theologians will want to understand primarily in terms of the divine economy and not for the most part in terms of some imagined original purpose for creation or in terms of 'nature'. In other words, if we are to understand human personhood Christianly, then we must look firstly not to Genesis 1 but rather to John 1 – to the Word made flesh who is the image of the invisible God.

Finally, a comment about the Church: the Bible does not provide a universal ethic that bypasses the particular demands placed upon those who seek to leave behind all claims to

²³ See Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), and Alan J. Torrance, 'The Theological Grounds for Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Sociopolitical Realm' in *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation, and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice* (ed. Daniel Philpott; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 45–85.

²⁴ Of course, justice is a relative idea, and who and what determines what a 'just' penalty is subject to cultural and historical variation. See Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 158–60.

power and entitlement and to follow Jesus in community. Christians are distinguished by their association with one who keeps odd company, who calls us to peculiarity, who continually corrects our range of view regarding the world's true nature, and who calls together a community which is constituted by and for a love so radically other-person-centred that it refuses to imagine life apart from blessing those who are opposed to it. It is a community which lives 'in the midst of the traffic and turmoil and conflict of the world'²⁵ and which does so in such a way that it is entirely uninterested and uninvested in its own self-preservation. It is a community which throws itself entirely into the embarrassing service of Jesus, and which does so not for God's sake but simply and solely for the sake of the world. It is a community which risks the refusal to engage in the politics of violence and in the economies of human indignity. It is a community which manifests God's orientation for every part of creation. It is a community which ventures out 'beyond the security of objective certainties, [and] worldly possessions, [and] finite aspirations and society's approval'. It is a community which risks even its life with God so that it might 'become contemporary with Christ'.²⁶

When, in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Tegel Prison cell that 'the church is the church only when it exists for others'²⁷ he was recalling that the Bible's witness is 'always a witness of resistance to the *status quo* in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death', a reminder that the event *par excellence* of the new creation – namely, the resurrection of the dead Jesus – creates both a community and an ethic which are not determined by that which is passing away but by what is God's promised future. 'Paradoxically', as another has written, 'those who embark on the biblical witness constantly risk death – through execution, exile, imprisonment, persecution, defamation, or harassment – at the behest of the rulers of this age. Yet those who do not resist the rulers of the present darkness are consigned to a moral death, the death of their humanness. That, of all the ways of dying, is the most ignominious'.²⁸

The Jesus community is called to lose faith in present arrangements, to be entirely undaunted by 'what the world calls possible', and to trust instead in the completely irresponsible impossibilities which 'exist first on God's lips' and in God's imagination.²⁹ It seems to me that only as the Church journeys the infrequently-trodden path away from the centres of imperial power and towards the embarrassing outskirts of Jerusalem and its public scorn is it given the kind of freedom to be the light of the world and the city on the hill of which Jesus speaks.

It is unclear to me what real theological work the witnessing community of faith does in Skillen's vision of a flourishing society. What is more clear to me is that the witnessing community's most basic event, the Lord's Supper, reminds God's people that the way they best serve the world is not by becoming more like it but rather by becoming more unlike it. It reminds us, as Karl Barth pointed out, that the only way the world can know that it is 'the world' is if the Church is 'the Church'.³⁰ Only when the Church is 'the Church' – i.e., a

²⁵ William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 19.

²⁶ Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 180.

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge, et al.; trans. Isabel Best, et al.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; vol. 8; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 56.

²⁸ William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 101.

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 269.

³⁰ See Karl Barth, *Insights: Karl Barth's Reflections on the Life of Faith* (ed. Eberhard Busch; trans. O.C. Dean Jr.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 90; Barth, *Community, State, and Church*, 141, 146;

people who embody the just political community of which the New Testament speaks – might the world be given a vision of an alternative way of being community that recognises the necessity for repentance. The fidelity of the Church’s participation in the ministry of Christ requires that she ‘take pains to disown publicly the patterns of colonialism’³¹ and of violent Constantinianism which have radically undermined her claim regarding Jesus’ lordship over all of life. Were we to do our thinking about the role of, and our relationship to, this ambiguous creature called ‘the State’ while seated around the Lord’s Table rather than in the domains of worldly power we may very well, even now, arrive at a more credible Christian script and prophetic witness than the mainstream Church has hitherto embraced on this matter.

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Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 461.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 12.