I. INTRODUCTION

On the issue of how the Christian faith intersects with politics and social activism, it seems many people today are caught in a false dichotomy. One either believes Christians are to strive to transform society, in which case believers should become political activists, or one believes Christians are supposed to focus on “saving souls,” in which case believers should leave larger societal problems for government to solve. In this essay I shall argue that neither of these alternatives captures the New Testament’s understanding of the relationship between faith, politics, and social activism.

If we understand Jesus’ life and death in its original socio-political context, I shall argue, it becomes evident that Jesus was a radical social activist who, for profoundly important reasons, refused to engage in politics. I shall contend that this refusal, among other things, revealed the absolute and all-important contrast between the Kingdom Jesus came to establish, on the one hand, and all versions of the kingdom of the world, on the other. I shall then argue that we who are committed to following Jesus are called to preserve this contrast in how we live and to engage in the same anti-political social activism Jesus engaged in.

II. JESUS’ POLITICAL REVOLT

If you were to hear that a white man offered his front row seat on a bus to an African-American woman, you would probably think of this as
a nice gesture. But if you then learned that this event happened in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955, you would reframe the gesture as going far beyond being nice. In the apartheid context of the pre-civil rights South, this act would have had incredible political significance. For this act would have constituted an explicit revolt against the laws and norms of the socio-political and even religious system of this time and place.

In the same way, many today view Jesus’ treatment of women, lepers, beggars, and non-Jews in the Gospels as merely nice, for they fail to interpret them in light of Jesus’ own cultural context. When they are interpreted against the socio-political and religious system of the time, these “nice” actions on the part of Jesus take on incredible political significance.

For example, when Jesus set aside the riches of his divine prerogatives and sided with the poor and oppressed (2 Cor 8:9), he was revolting against a socio-political system that privileged a few by oppressing the masses. When Jesus praised the faith of a Roman centurion and held up Samaritans (in explicit contrast with Jewish leaders!) as heroes in some of his illustrations, he was revolting against a socio-political hierarchical system that placed some above others on the basis of their race. The respectful way Jesus treated women—even women with disreputable histories—revolted against a socio-political and religious system that tended to empower men and dehumanize women. And the dignifying way Jesus interacted with and identified with beggars and others on the fringe of society revolted against a socio-political system that ascribed worth to people based on their class, wealth, and power. In acting this way, Jesus was not just being nice. He was defying unjust, oppressive, and dehumanizing laws and norms of the polis.

Along the same lines, when Jesus ate and fellowshipped with prostitutes and tax collectors, he was revolting against a socio-political and religious system that judged some as worse sinners than others based on a self-serving, sin-gradation scale. The scandalous way Jesus treated lepers and others deemed untouchable revolted against a social-political and religious system that dehumanized certain people by declaring them “unclean” while barricading them from the community. Similarly, when Jesus fed and healed people on the Sabbath, he was revolting against a dehumanizing socio-political and religious system that placed compliance with traditions over the well-being of people. These actions were not

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1The modern concept of “race” arose largely as a by-product of European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. White Europeans used the concept of differing races to justify conquering, oppressing, and enlisting non-European groups. See M. Meltzer, Slavery: A World History (rev. ed.; Cambridge, MA: DaCapo, 1993) and A. Smedley, Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview (2nd ed.; Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999). Nevertheless, while I grant that it is, in this sense, anachronistic to speak of the prejudice Jesus revolted against as “racial,” this is how most today would assess his revolt, which is why I continue, reluctantly, to use the terms “race” and “racism.”
merely “nice.” They were acts of revolt against dominant aspects of the *polis*. They were, in this sense, politically revolutionary.

It was this kind of scandalous, politically significant behavior that eventually got Jesus crucified, and this too—this especially—was filled with political significance. Jesus refused to play the role of a militant nationalistic leader that most Jews wanted a messianic figure to play. By refusing to side with Israel over and against Rome, Jesus was defying, in a most shocking way, the intense religious nationalism of his own people. And by refusing to engage in violence to defend himself and his cause or allow his followers to do so, Jesus was rebelling against a socio-political system—indeed, an entire world system—that legitimized the use of violence to preserve and advance one’s personal, tribal or national self-interest. Jesus was exposing and confronting the ugliness and evil of the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone way of living in the fallen world, while manifesting the beauty and holiness of a God-centered, servant-oriented, peace-promoting way of life.² He was rebelling against, and in principle overthrowing, the kingdom of darkness by manifesting and establishing the Kingdom of God. Things just do not get more politically significant than *this*.

### III. JESUS’ SPIRITUAL REVOLT

Jesus was a political revolutionary in the way that he lived and died (not to mention in the way he victoriously rose from the dead and ascended to the very “throne” of God). But we will miss the most profound aspect of Jesus’ life and death if we stop here. For, if we frame Jesus’ life and death in its original historical context, it becomes clear that Jesus’ revolt against oppressive, unjust, and dehumanizing aspects of the socio-political and religious system of his day was, *at the same time*, a revolt against the demonic forces that empower all unjust and dehumanizing socio-political and religious systems.

More specifically, Jesus and the movement he birthed were steeped in the apocalyptic worldview that was widely influential in first-century Judaism. In this worldview, the whole of creation, including every aspect of human society, was believed to be caught in the crossfire of an ongoing battle between cosmic forces of good and evil.³ This apocalyptic perspective is reflected throughout the NT in a number of ways, including

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the unprecedented authority ascribed to Satan, the consistent depictions of illnesses and deformities as demonically caused, and the characterization of this epoch as evil and as soon approaching its end.\(^4\)

In this apocalyptic worldview, all governments were understood to ultimately belong to Satan, the “god of this age” who “controls the entire world” (Luke 4:5–7; 2 Cor 4:4; 1 John 5:19, cf. Rev 13). Other aspects of creation and society were viewed as being under the influence of cosmic powers, variously labeled as “rulers,” “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “dominions,” “cosmic powers,” “thrones,” “spiritual forces,” “elemental spirits of the universe,” and “gods” (henceforth identified as “the Powers”).\(^5\) In the view of the earliest Jesus-followers, Jesus had not come primarily to revolt against human socio-political and religious systems that were not in line with God’s reign—though he certainly did that. He had come primarily to establish the Kingdom of God by overthrowing the Powers that undergird these ungodly systems. “The reason the Son of God appeared,” John says, “was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). The self-sacrificial love displayed on Calvary and the power of God displayed in Jesus’ resurrection broke “the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). In giving his life, Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” and “made a

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\(^4\) On infirmities as being demonically caused, see Greg Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997) ch. 6. In contrast to modern day apocalyptic popularizers (e.g. the *Left Behind* series), many scholars have argued that the New Testament’s apocalyptic imagery describing the end of the world was not intended to be interpreted in a strictly literally fashion and may in fact refer to events surrounding the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70. See e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); N. T. Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, 280–99. See also Andrew Perriman, *Re:Mission: Biblical Mission for a PostBiblical Church* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

public spectacle of them” (Col 2:15). And when Jesus rose from the dead, “all things”—including God’s enemies—were placed “under his feet” (Heb 2:8), and he was seated “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be invoked” (Eph 1:21, cf. Col 1:20).6

At the same time, Jesus’ death and resurrection simply culminated the driving motif of his entire life and ministry. Just as many aspects of Jesus’ life constituted a political revolt, so too many aspects of his life constituted a spiritual revolt.7 In fact, understood in its original first-century apocalyptic context, Jesus’ political and spiritual revolt must be understood as two sides of the same coin. Every act of revolt against oppressive, unjust, and dehumanizing socio-political and religious systems was at the same time an act of revolt against the Powers that fuel these systems. Jesus’ solidarity with the poor, for example, was itself a revolt against the Powers that fuel greed and poverty.

In this sense, Jesus was a political and spiritual revolutionary, and he was the one because he was the other. He was, in short, a political-spiritual revolutionary.

IV. PARTICIPATING IN THE POLITICAL-SPRITUAL REVOLUTION

For all who submit their life to Jesus and who regard the NT to be authoritative for their faith and life, the apocalyptic context of Jesus’ revolt cannot be dismissed as an odd artifact of history that can be stripped from the contemporary Christian worldview. For, according to the NT, all who profess Christ as Lord are called and empowered to imitate Jesus’ Kingdom lifestyle and therefore participate in his revolt against the Powers.

While Jesus in principle defeated the Powers through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, his victory has not yet been manifested as a fully accomplished fact (Heb 2:8). Though Satan’s demise is certain, even after the resurrection and ascension, the NT authors affirm that he continues to reign as “the god of this age” and “the principality and power of the air” who “controls the entire world” (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2; 1 John 5:19). Hence, even after the resurrection and ascension, Christians must struggle against the Powers (Eph 6:12). To borrow a helpful analogy from WWII, we live in the interval between “D-


7It lies outside the scope of this essay to discuss the way Jesus’ healings, exorcisms and nature miracles revolted against the Powers. On this, see Boyd, “Christus Victor View” and idem, The Beauty That Revolts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).
day” and “V-day,” and during this time Jesus continues to fight the Powers through us, his corporate body. And by this means Jesus continues to grow the mustard seed of the political-spiritual revolution he inaugurated.

This is why the NT places such a strong emphasis on following Jesus’ example. Our calling is to manifest the same Kingdom and engage in the same counter-cultural, lifestyle-warfare as Jesus did. “Whoever claims to live in him,” John says, “must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). We are to “imitate God,” according to Paul, which means we are to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:1–2). We are to follow Jesus’ example of humble, loving service to one another—even when we, like Jesus, know that those whose feet we are washing will soon betray us (John 13:15).

So too, Peter instructs people facing persecution to follow Christ’s example of self-sacrificial love, even when they suffer unjustly (1 Pet 2:20–21). We are to aspire to have every aspect of our life conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (e.g. Eph 4:17–27; 5:1–2; Col 3:1–17).

Following Christ’s example and participating in the Kingdom of God requires that we live in revolt against the socio-political and religious systems of our culture insofar as they are inconsistent with the reign of God, just as Jesus did. It therefore requires that we revolt against the Powers that fuel ungodly socio-political and religious systems, just as Jesus did. While we are to live in peace and submit to the laws of whatever country we find ourselves in, insofar as this is possible (Rom 13:1–7), we are commanded to “obey God rather than men” when the two come into conflict (Acts 5:29; cf. 4:19). We are to resist being conformed to the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone “pattern of the world” and instead seek to be transformed into the image of Christ, who voluntarily gave his life for his enemies out of love (Rom 12:2).

To live this way sets us in opposition to the Powers. Hence, followers of Jesus are to “take [our] stand against the devil’s schemes,” realizing that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:11–12). We are to see ourselves as soldiers in war, stationed behind enemy lines, whose job is to obey our commanding officer as he uses us to tear down enemy strongholds (2 Tim 2:4, 2 Cor 10:3–5).

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9For an excellent treatment of Ephesians 6, emphasizing the battle is against the Powers, not people, see T. Yoder Neufelt, “Put on the Armour of God”: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
In short, as followers of Jesus, we are called and empowered to individually and corporately manifest the beautiful reign of God, just as Jesus did and to therefore live as political-spiritual revolutionaries, just as Jesus did. Our life is to be a sustained revolt against the Powers that undergird the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone, socio-political and religious systems of the fallen world.

V. AN ANTI-POLITICAL POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Given the centrality of following Jesus’ example, it is vitally important we not only notice that Jesus was a political-spiritual revolutionary, but how he was a political-spiritual revolutionary. And here is where the false dichotomy that characterizes many people’s thinking about the relationship between faith, politics, and social activism gets exposed.

While Jesus was politically revolutionary, as we have seen, he never showed the slightest interest in politics.\(^{10}\) Neither did any of his earliest followers. The only instructions Christians are given vis-à-vis government in the NT is to respect and submit to authorities as much as possible, to pay our taxes, and to pray for leaders so there will be peace (Mark 12:13–17; Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17). And even these instructions are not given out of any concern for how government should run but to simply facilitate the spreading of the Gospel.

This complete lack of political interest is particularly surprising when we remember that Jesus entered the world in politically hot times and consciously embraced the role of “Messiah.”\(^{11}\) There was a litany of political controversies first-century Jews wrestled with, centered mostly

\(^{10}\)Thus, some have characterized Jesus’ mission and message as “non-political”; e.g. see W. E. Pilgrim, Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 116–19. Even A. Storkey, who characterizes Jesus’ concerns as being highly “political” in nature (i.e. Jesus’ movement had undeniable “political” implications, as I have suggested above), admits that, when it comes to the question of the power-over politics of this world (including the first-century Jewish politics of his day), Jesus is best characterized as “anti-political”; Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 125.

\(^{11}\)Through much of the twentieth century, many critical NT scholars have rejected the traditional claim that Jesus embraced the role of Messiah. For cogent defenses (from different perspectives) of Jesus’ messianic self-consciousness—though with a decidedly modified conception of the Messiah vis-à-vis the cultural expectations of his day—see N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 477–539; Martin Hengel, “Jesus, the Messiah of Israel,” in Studies in Early Christology (Edinburgh: Clark, 1995) 1–72; and P. R. Eddy’s contribution to the forthcoming volume, R. B. Stewart, ed., Memories of Jesus: A Critical Assessment of James D. G. Dunn’s Quest of the Historical Jesus (Nashville: B&H Academic).
on how they should respond to Roman oppression. Not only this, but, as noted above, many Jews were looking for a political, militant, and nationalistic messiah who would resolve all these political controversies and ultimately free the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors.

Not surprisingly, as Jesus’ fame as a teacher, healer, and exorcist began to spread, fellow Jews repeatedly tried to fit him into their expectations for a prophet/Messiah and to get him to weigh in on these hot political topics. But without exception, Jesus refused to even comment on these issues.

Why was this? Some have suggested that Jesus and the earliest disciples were silent about politics because they lived under a totalitarian regime which they were powerless to affect. Had they lived in a democracy, says this line of reasoning, they certainly would have had much to say. This argument has a certain common sense appeal, but a little reflection exposes it to be without merit.

For one thing, this explanation does not address the all-important fact that Jesus’ lack of interest in politics starkly contrasted with that of his contemporaries. How can we explain Jesus’ silence by appealing to the totalitarian regime he was under when his contemporaries, living under this same regime, were so vocal about politics? In reality, while first-century Jews obviously could not vote by casting a ballot, they had plenty of other ways of “voting” if they were interested in trying to alter the political landscape. From refusing to pay taxes to sabotaging specific Roman endeavors to picking up the sword, first-century Jews had many political options. Indeed, these were the very things they debated so intensely. Yet, neither Jesus nor his disciples (once they got clear on how Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God differed from the kingdom of the world, e.g. Mark 8:27–38; 9:30–37; 10:32–45) showed any interest in discussing these options.

Not only this, but Jesus had plenty of other ways of affecting the political landscape if this is what he was interested in doing. As he told his disciples, he could have called “twelve legions of angels” to defend him and defeat his opponents if that is what he was concerned with (Matt 26:53). In fact, at one point in his ministry, he had all the authority of the kingdoms of the world offered to him on a silver platter. He could have instantly given the entire world the best version of worldly government imaginable. Yet Jesus rejected this offer as a temptation of the devil (Luke 4:5–7), for the Kingdom Jesus came to unleash into this world was not a new and improved—or even “the best imaginable”—version of worldly government.

Clearly, Jesus’ lack of interest in worldly government was not merely due to the unfortunate form of government he happened to be under. Rather, his anti-political stance reflects the radically unique way Jesus was a political-spiritual revolutionary and, therefore, the radically unique way we who follow him are called to be political-spiritual revolutionaries.

VI. DE-LEGITIMIZING CAESAR
To begin to flesh out the uniqueness of Jesus’ political-spiritual revolution, it is important to notice that Jesus did not simply ignore people’s attempts to lure him into political debates. He responded to them but never on the terms their questions set. He consistently found a way of transforming their questions to him regarding the kingdom of the world into his questions toward them about the Kingdom of God.

For example, at one point in his ministry, some opponents tried to get Jesus to weigh in on the divisive topic of whether or not Jews should obey the law of the land and support the oppressive Roman government by paying taxes. Jesus neither ignored nor obliged the question. Instead, he simply held up a coin and asked, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” It was, of course, the emperor’s. So, Jesus concluded, “Give . . . to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and [give] to God the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:20–22).

Throughout history religious leaders have cited these words to support their contention that Christians have a duty to their government—to be good citizens, to vote, to serve in office and even, according to some, to fight for their nation.12 If we understand Jesus’ clever response in its original context, however, his teaching implies nothing of the sort.

Torah-keeping Jews of this time were deeply offended by currency that bore the image of the emperor. They saw it not only as egotistical on the part of the emperor but as a direct violation of the commandment against making images (Exod 20:4; Lev 26:1).13 They understood that only God can make an image of himself, and he did so when he made humans (Gen 1:26–27). In responding to his audience, Jesus was brilliantly linking the issue of pagan egotism and idolatry with the issue of paying taxes. He was in essence saying, “Since this piece of idolatrous metal bears the emperor’s image, it obviously belongs to him. Why should we Jews who know this metal is idolatrous and belongs to Caesar bicker about how much we are supposed to keep? Our only concern should be with making sure we are giving to God that which bears his image—namely, our whole being.” In this way Jesus wisely transformed

12Today, this argument remains quite common at the popular level of Christian thought. For example, R. Cobb argues that Jesus’ command to “render” to Caesar what is Caesar’s means we “are obligated to fulfill our duties to the state, such as paying taxes, voting, serving on juries, etc. I believe that we are ‘rendering unto Caesar’ when we honor the flag and show patriotism”; “Render unto Caesar: The Place of Politics in Modern Christianity,” News for Christians, available at http://ll.newsforchristians.com/sermons/sermon009.html (accessed 8-24-08).

13In some regions the Jewish outrage against coins bearing the emperor’s image was so great the government minted special coins without this image. I, along with P. R. Eddy, have discussed this phenomenon in The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 109, 112, 118–19.
a question pertaining to the reign of Caesar into a question that pertained to the reign of God.

This and other episodes make it clear that Jesus did not come to answer our political questions or give us a “new and improved” version of the kingdoms of the world. He rather came to raise a radically different set of questions and establish a radically different kind of Kingdom. He came to plant the mustard seed of a new, alternative world order under the reign of God that would render all the “power-over” type kingdoms of the world obsolete. Far from merely being due to his non-democratic historical circumstances, therefore, Jesus’ refusal to engage in political debate reveals the profundity of his socio-political revolt. He would not even legitimize the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone way of running the world to the point of allowing it to set the terms of his revolt against it. He rather revolted against it by simply remaining faithful to the God-centered, other-oriented,(agape)-promoting, alternative Kingdom.

VII. A KINGDOM THAT IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

The unique way Jesus was a political-spiritual revolutionary, we see, was rooted in his preserving the contrast between the Kingdom he came to establish and the reigning kingdoms of the world. To fully appreciate the importance of Jesus’ unique way of revolting, we have to fully appreciate the absolute nature of this contrast.

This contrast was put on center stage when Jesus was on trial. Pilate asked him if he was the king of the Jews (John 18:33), to which he replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders” (John 18:36). Jesus informed Pilate that the domain over which he was king was nothing like the power-over governments of the world. It was on a completely

14So argues Lee Camp, Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003) 105. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Ethics [New York: Simon & Shuster, 1995 [1949] 350) also makes the point well when he writes: “Jesus concerns himself hardly at all with the solution of worldly problems. When he is asked to do so His answer is remarkably evasive, . . . . Indeed, He scarcely ever replies to men’s questions directly, but answers rather from a quite different plane. His word is not an answer to human questions and problems; it is the answer of God to the question of God to man. His word is essentially determined not from below but from above. It is not a solution, but a redemption.”

15For an extended discussion of the important difference between Jesus’ consistent “power-under” tactic of self-sacrificial agape-love, as opposed to the world’s consistent “power-over” tactics i.e. self/group domination over others, see G. A. Boyd, The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 14, 17–49.
different plane and from “another place” (John 18:36). And then, most significantly, he substantiated his claim by drawing Pilate’s attention to the fact that his servants were not fighting in his defense.

The most fundamental feature of earthly governments is that they are willing to use whatever force is necessary to protect and advance their self-interests. As Jacques Ellul has insightfully argued, violence is intrinsic to all power-over systems. Governments, states and nations cannot exist in this fallen world without the use of violence. Any government that tried to love, bless, and serve threatening enemies rather than retaliate against them would not survive very long. This is precisely why Jesus appealed to the absence of violence among those who were citizens of his Kingdom as proof that his Kingdom was completely different from the kingdoms of the world. Rather than using a sword against enemies to defend and advance its cause, the Kingdom “that is not of this world” relies on self-sacrificial love to advance its cause.

Jesus poignantly illustrated this point just hours before his discussion with Pilate. As Jesus was in the process of being arrested, Peter took out his sword to defend him and ended up cutting off a guard’s ear. Jesus rebuked Peter and then demonstrated the unique way warfare was to be done under the reign of God. He demonstrated God’s love for his enemy and served his enemy by miraculously reattaching his ear (Luke 22:50–51). Nothing could more fundamentally contradict the defining feature of the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone kingdoms of the world than a response like this to a threatening enemy.

Yet, the point was even more forcefully illustrated just hours after Jesus’ discussion with Pilate. Rather than using the power that was available to him to defend himself and crush his enemies, Jesus waged a unique kind of war by allowing himself to be mocked, tortured, and killed by his enemies. He offered himself up out of love for his enemies and on behalf of his enemies. By refusing to hate and retaliate, even though he obviously would have been justified in doing so, Jesus was assailing and overthrowing the Powers that fuel the self-centered, power-oriented, violence-prone kingdoms of the world. And he was demonstrating that in the Kingdom he was inaugurating, warfare is never waged against flesh and blood. Rather, it is waged against the Powers and on behalf of flesh and blood. Therefore, it is never carried out by the power of a sword but by the power of self-sacrificial love in service to others—including one’s enemies.

VIII. CONTRASTING FOUNDATIONS

Clearly, Jesus was not overstating matters when he said his kingdom was not of this world. But the contrast between the Kingdom Jesus

represented and all the versions of the kingdom of the world goes even deeper than this. While love for enemies and the refusal to use violence is the most visible way the Kingdom of God differs from worldly kingdoms, this contrast is actually a by-product of even more foundational points of contrast. We mention three.

First, while all human governments in this fallen world are premised on rebellion against God, the Kingdom of God is premised on submission to God. As we noted above, the most fundamental feature of human governments is their willingness to use whatever force is necessary to protect and advance their national self-interests. Their very existence is predicated on citizens trusting political and military leaders to carry out this task.

When Israel, desiring to be like other nations, called for this kind of worldly security, God said his people were rejecting him (1 Sam 8:7, 19–20). God’s original dream for humans—illustrated initially in the microcosm of his chosen people—was for God himself to reign over all humanity while humans reigned over the earth and animal kingdom (Gen 1:26–28).

It is this dream that is realized in the Kingdom of God. While citizens outside the Kingdom strive to rule over one another, Jesus said, it was not to be so among citizens of God’s Kingdom (Mark 10:42–45). Having died to the fallen need to protect and advance our personal or national self-interests, we are free to seek first the Kingdom of God and trust that God will provide all the security we need (Matt 6:26–34).

Closely related to this, while all human governments in this fallen world are premised on people pledging allegiance to nationalistic ideals and the structures that express and protect them, the Kingdom of God is premised on people pledging allegiance to God alone. Knowing we

17 Deut 17:14–20 may seem to contradict 1 Samuel 8, for in Deuteronomy Yahweh tells the Israelites what to look for in a king when they entered the Promised Land. Yet, in Deuteronomy 17 Yahweh simply predicts that once the Israelites are settled in the land they will say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us” (v. 14)—which is, in essence, precisely what they say in 1 Sam 8:5. Yahweh does not say he approves of this in Deuteronomy 17, any more than he does in 1 Samuel 8. The only difference between the two passages is that Yahweh holds out hope that an Israelite king could be relatively good in Deuteronomy 17 (vv. 16–20), while by the time we get to 1 Samuel 8, Yahweh warns the people that their king will act just like pagan kings, violating every one of the qualities he laid out in Deuteronomy 17 (see 1 Sam 8:11–18).

18 Like many other evangelical authors, Chuck Colson goes to great lengths to discuss the tensions that arise because of the “dual allegiances” of Christians—to God and to country. See, for example, Charles W. Colson and Ellen S. Vaughn, God and Government, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). But we have to ask ourselves: Where in the New Testament is there any suggestion we are to have any allegiance to an earthly Kingdom? Certainly we are to obey laws and respect leaders (Rom 13:1–7), but that is because God instructs us to, not because we have any intrinsic allegiance to them. On the importance of reading Romans
cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24), and remembering that the Lord we have pledged ourselves to is Lord over all the nations and the Lord who gave his life for all people, we are freed from the curse of Babel which divides people up according to tribes and nations. As citizens of “heaven” (Phil 3:20) who are whole-heartedly submitted to the Kingdom of God (Matt 6:33), we are called to live as “aliens and strangers” in whatever country we happen to find ourselves (1 Pet 2:11). Like soldiers stationed in a foreign country, we are never to become too preoccupied with the “civilian affairs” of the region but are instead to focus on pleasing our “commanding officer” (2 Tim 2:4).

Finally, and most fundamentally, all human governments in this fallen world are under the strong influence of Satan, the “ruler” of the world and “god of this age” (John 12:31; 14:32; 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; cf. Luke 4:5–7; Eph 2:2; 1 John 5:19). The world’s governments are together the beast and Babylon, the political wing of Satan’s empire that deceives the world. By contrast, the Kingdom Jesus planted is premised on the truth that Jesus has in principle vanquished this ruler and set people free to live under God’s reign, as God always intended. We are called to have confidence that the sovereign God, for whom all the nations and militaries of the world are “less than nothing” and “worthless” (Isa 40:5, 17), orchestrates these governments to carry out as much justice as possible (Rom 13:1–7). Yet, our unique call is to

13 in context, see the insightful comments of M. Hengel, Victory over Violence, 62–64; also W. E. Pilgrim, Uneasy Neighbors, 27–35.


20See Rev 13; 14:8; 17:5; 18. As A. R. Gwyther notes: “Revelation was addressed to a circle of Christian communities in the midst of a culture satisfied with the ideology of the Roman Empire. It called them to cease their cooperation with the Empire. In response to this crisis the book of Revelation sought to counter both the myth and praxis of Empire.” A. R. Gwyther, “New Jerusalem versus Babylon: Reading the Book of Revelation as a Text of a Circle of Counter-Imperial Christian Communities in the First-Century Roman Empire,” (Ph.D. diss., Griffith University, 1999) iii. Gwyther goes on to point out that the terms associated with “the beast” (e.g. “power,” a “throne,” “great authority”) are “drawn from the semantic field of imperial political rule” (108). On the beast and Babylon as representing worldly government under the power of Satan, see also Jacques Ellul, Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation, trans. G. W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977). For some prophetic insights on America as a contemporary Babylon, see W. Stringfellow, Ethic for Christians, 33.

21Paul says: “The authorities that exist have been established (tetagramenai eisin) by God” (Rom 13:1). The phrase includes the periphrastic perfect passive of tassō and denotes God ordering governments as he finds them to carry out his
faithfully manifest a Kingdom that does not at all resemble any of these kingdoms, precisely because the citizens of this Kingdom have been freed from the rebellion, allegiances, and Powers that undergird these kingdoms. And for these same reasons, the citizens of this Kingdom have been freed to imitate Jesus in waging a war of self-sacrificial, Calvary-like love on behalf of others and against the Powers, rather than a war of violence against others on behalf of the Powers.

IX. ARE WE EMBODYING THE CONTRAST?

As we have seen, for Jesus, everything depends on preserving the absolute contrast between the Kingdom he came to establish and the socio-political and religious systems of the world. He unleashed an utterly unique political-spiritual revolution by embodying this contrast.

In this light, the most fundamental question we American Christians need to ask ourselves—the question that must be asked even before we begin to wrestle with practical questions about how Christians should or should not participate in politics—is this: Are we, as a whole, embodying this contrast? Do our lives, individually and corporately, manifest the uniquely beautiful reign of God and thus revolt against the socio-political and religious systems insofar as they are at odds with this reign?

While there is a growing movement of people in America and around the globe who are becoming captivated by the New Testament’s vision of the Kingdom, all indications are that, for the American church as a whole, the above questions must be answered negatively.

A number of studies have clearly revealed what most Christian pastors and educators already knew: there is, in fact, very little difference between the core values and lifestyle of professing Christians and non-Christians in America.22 For example, though our standard of living is four times the global average, and though Christ calls us to revolt against greed and poverty by living self-sacrificial lives in solidarity with the will as much as possible. It does not entail that governments as they are necessarily reflect God’s will—as though Hitler and Stalin were doing what God wanted them to do!

22David Kinnaman notes that “The research shows that people’s moral profile is more likely to resemble that of their peer group than it is to take shape around the tenets of a person’s faith. This research paints a compelling picture that moral values are shifting very quickly and significantly within the Christian community as well as outside of it,” “A New Generation of Adults Bends Moral and Sexual Rules to Their Liking,” The Barna Update (Oct. 31, 2006), available: http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=249 (accessed 8-23-08). See also “Faith has a Limited Effect on Most People’s Behavior,” The Barna Update (May 24, 2004), available at http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=164 (accessed 8-23-08).
poor, the average American Christian spends just under 97 per cent of their income on themselves—which is almost identical to what non-
Christians spend on themselves. And despite the fact that Christ calls us to revolt against racism and classism, manifesting a Kingdom in which there is a sharing of resources such that the command of God to Israel that “there shall be no poor among you” (Deut 15:4) is finally fulfilled (cf. Acts 2:44–45), the American Church continues to be more deeply divided by race and class lines than the broader culture.

Along the same lines, while Christ calls us to be known by our exceptional self-sacrificial love and humility, evangelical Christians are widely disdained in the broader American culture for their judgmentalism and arrogance. And despite the fact that Christ calls us to engage in warfare by loving and serving enemies rather than engaging in violence against them, American Christians are as prone to aggression and tend to be even more supportive of the United States military than their non-
Christian neighbors. Today, in America, it does not seem Jesus could appeal to his servants’ unwillingness to use violence as evidence that his Kingdom is not of this world.

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23Recent data shows that lower-income families give 4.5 per cent of their income on average, compared to 2.5 per cent for middle-class families and 3 per cent for the upper-class; see A. C. Brooks, “A Nation of Givers,” The American (March/April 2008), available at http://www.american.com/archive/2008/march-
april-magazine-contents/a-nation-of-givers (accessed May 25, 2008). In a similar vein, George Barna’s research has shown that the more money someone makes, the less likely they are to tithe; see “Evangelicals Are the Most Generous Givers, but Fewer than 10% of Born Again Christians Give 10% to Their Church”; online:http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID =52 (accessed May 25, 2008). For an in-depth study revealing that, in America, religious faith often has no real influence upon economic behavior, see Robert Wuthnow, God and Mammon in America (New York: Free, 1998). Such trends in the American church ought to be especially concerning to us in light of Jesus’ strong warnings about the dangers of riches and the difficulty the rich have entering the Kingdom (e.g. Matt 6:19–24; Mark 10:24–25). By both historic and current global standards, all of us middle-to-upper class Americans are exceedingly rich.


26For example, on the high level of evangelical Christian support for the Iraq war, see Ethan Cole, “Most Evangelical Leaders Still Support Iraq War,” The Christian Post (Feb. 12, 2008) http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080212/
In short, all indications are that American Christians tend to be as defined by the values, attitudes and behavior patterns of the American empire as are non-Christians. For a people who are called to bear witness to God’s beautiful reign by how our lives contrast with the broader culture, this state of affairs has to be regarded as nothing short of catastrophic!

What makes this situation even worse, however, is that American Christians on the whole do not seem to view worldly government the way Jesus and the NT authors did. Indeed, as with all other aspects of the culture, all indications are that American evangelicals are at least as invested in the politics of Caesar as are non-Christians. We are not, on the whole, acting like our only allegiance is to our King and his Kingdom. We are not behaving like we are aliens and strangers in this land or soldiers stationed behind enemy lines. In contradiction to Paul’s mandate, we seem to be quite preoccupied with “civilian affairs.”

In fact, while we are, as a whole, not uniting together to transform the culture by manifesting a contrasting Kingdom, we are significantly divided over how to transform the culture by participating in Caesar’s kingdom. Christian leaders on the “right” work feverishly to rally the faithful around one set of political issues, while Christian leaders on the “left” do the same for another set of political issues. People on both sides sincerely believe we can further the Kingdom of God if we just get the “right” candidate in office, pass the “right” policies and get people to be concerned with the “right” issues. Indeed, overlooking the massive ambiguity of political issues in a pluralistic culture, people on both sides sometimes claim to espouse not just the “right” politics, but God’s politics. So both sides call on believers to vote “their faith and values”—implying that fellow believers who disagree with them clearly are not voting in line with Christian faith and values.

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28The propagandistic slogan, “vote your faith and values,” has always baffled me. It seems to me every person who takes their vote at all seriously—including
failing to keep the Kingdom “holy,” set apart, distinct, and consecrated. We are fusing the cross with the assumed rightness and moral superiority of our political perspectives.29

X. A BROKEN CHURCH TRYING TO FIX CAESAR

This has created a tragically ironic, if not bizarre, situation. We now have in America a church that is failing quite miserably at doing what it is called to do, while spending much time and energy trying to tell government what it should do—which itself is not something Jesus ever told his followers to do! As a church we are widely missing the mark, yet we are focused on telling government how it is missing the mark, while fighting amongst ourselves about what hitting Caesar’s mark should look like. We are blinded by a log in our own eye, yet are intent on taking a dust particle out of Caesar’s eye (Matt 7:1–3). We have, in short, a massively broken church that is intent on trying to fix Caesar.

To illustrate with one specific example, the majority of American Christians are not significantly adjusting our consumer lifestyles to reflect Jesus’ compassion to the poor and disenfranchised, as we noted above. Yet a number of Christian leaders are passionately focused on trying to get the faithful to rally around their opinions about how government should take responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised.

This is not only ironic from a Kingdom perspective, it is tragically counterproductive, for it encourages people to think that expressing their opinions about what government should do is what it means to take responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised. So we have in America many believers who cast their vote or march in a rally and then immediately return to their typical American lifestyle, spending 97 per cent of their income on themselves, feeling good in their conviction that they have just fulfilled their Christian duty to take responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised!

The example illustrates that our current focus on politics does not simply distract us from addressing the brokenness of the church—it contributes to it. I am convinced that one of the fundamental reasons the American church as a whole has not owned responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised is that we have allowed ourselves to think it is mainly government’s responsibility. We are not, as a whole, involved in costly living, in part because we have come to invest so much trust in the atheist—already votes in accordance with their faith and values. There is simply no other plausible way to vote.

29For a full exposition of how the evangelical church has failed to preserve the holiness of the Kingdom by allowing it to become politicized, see Greg Boyd, Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).
power of a vote, which costs us nothing. We have been so conditioned by the long and tragic tradition of Christendom, dating back to Constantine, that it now seems obvious that if you really want to bring about change, you have to do it by influencing Caesar. We, to a large degree, have exchanged the foolishness of carrying the cross for the wisdom of political efficiency. Living a self-sacrificial life modeled after Christ is, of course, still hailed as our ideal, but to effect real change we need to change laws and policies and sometimes use bullets and drop bombs.

In short, we are not individually and collectively engaging in sacrificial lifestyle-warfare against the Powers because we have placed our trust in—and therefore become preoccupied with—struggles against “flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12). We are not, as a whole, manifesting the beautiful, Jesus-looking Kingdom because we have, to a large extent, succumbed to the temptation of the devil to place our trust in the Caesar-looking kingdom.

The Christian faith is not a private, individualistic affair, for we are called to transform society and ultimately the world. But everything hangs on how we believe we are called to do this. What I have tried to show in this essay is that we are called to do it in the way of Jesus, not Caesar. We’re called to do this by how we live, not how we vote. We are called to be political-spiritual revolutionaries who trust in the power of the cross, not in laws, policies, bombs, or bullets.

Of course, due to space limitations, there are a million practical questions that this essay cannot address regarding how Christians should or should not affect the political process. I by no means dismiss all of these as illegitimate. Yet, until we are, as a distinct tribe of people, doing much better at manifesting the Kingdom in how we live, while revolting

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30On the “revolution” brought about by Constantine’s merger of church and state, see Rowan A. Greer, Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986) 149–53. As Greer (152, emphasis in text) notes, in the post-Constantinian climate, the “alien character of Christian citizenship is for all practical purposes abolished, and it is possible for the ‘kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’ to be reduced to ‘the kingdom of the world’ (Rev 11:15).” On the politically motivated transformation of the post-Constantinian church in regard to intolerance, violence, etc., see the impressive study by H. A. Drake, Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). I have offered my own thoughts on the Constantinian revolution and the damage it has wrought in Myth of a Christian Nation, chaps. 4 and 5.

31For a brilliant, compelling and prophetic analysis of how Christianity becomes corrupted when it focuses on practically assessing and fixing the world rather than simply being the eschatological community that embodies the coming Kingdom, see J. Ellul, The False Presence of the Kingdom, trans. C. E. Hopkins (New York: Seabury, 1972); and idem, The Subversion of Christianity, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).
against the Powers the way Jesus did, it seems to me that striving to resolve these issues is of little Kingdom value.