
Pro Rege

Volume 17 | Number 2

Article 5

December 1988

Christian Faith and Public Policy (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

King, Don (1988) "Christian Faith and Public Policy (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 17: No. 2, 32 - 33.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol17/iss2/5

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Book Reviews

Christian Faith and Public Policy. Arthur Simon. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987. Reviewed by Don King, Assistant Professor of Political Science.

There has been no dearth of books in recent years calling the Christian community to political involvement. In *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, Art Simon (brother of Illinois Senator Paul Simon) challenges the unpersuaded who continue to assume that an active role for Christians in promoting policy change is "either unimportant or wrongheaded." Citizenship is a gift of God, he states, largely wasted if not adequately exercised.

This was a lesson Simon learned while serving as pastor of a congregation on New York's Lower East Side. The efforts by churches and other organizations to alleviate human needs, like hunger and housing, were beneficial but never adequate. It was demonstrated repeatedly that the problems were rooted in social inequities that could only be rectified ultimately by changes in governmental laws and regulations. Such changes can only be triggered by political action.

"Bread for the World"—a Christian citizens movement—emerged from an awareness of this need to mobilize citizens on behalf of policy reform. Simon, who now serves as Executive Director of BFW, is a champion of citizen advocacy, which is the central thrust of his book. There can be no dichotomy between private and public responsibility for social problems, says Simon. Here he draws upon the reformational Christian political thinking of James Skillen and the late Bernard Zylstra, in arguing persuasively that the state is a divine creation with a mandate to promote *public justice*.

While the full implications of this norm for the state are not addressed, Simon makes two important points: 1) that the state has a responsibility to act against injustice whenever a vacuum or void exists, and 2) citizens, at least in a democracy, have the opportunity to speak out in favor of policies they believe are just and against those that are unjust. Simon does not underestimate the important contributions of other institutions, but acknowledges their limitations. Using the example of hunger, he illustrates that only the state commands the authority, resources and control over the structures necessary to address world famine. Private relief efforts are extremely beneficial, but alone are inadequate to meet global needs and tackle contributing factors such as international debt, foreign trade, and third world development. By opposing this proper exercise of state authority, Simon believes Christians will only perpetuate the very suffering they seek to alleviate as ministers of the gospel.

Once Christians overcome their resistance to active involvement by the state to promote justice, the major challenge is to determine the policies that should be adopted to fulfill this calling. The danger here is for Christians who

have accepted this challenge to try to move directly from biblical texts to policy prescriptions. This is identified by Simon as one of the serious flaws of the new religious right. Since the Bible is not a government handbook, he advocates an intermediate step using basic scriptural norms to formulate "derived moral principles" which then serve as guidelines for shaping public policy. This intermediate level, where he correctly observes disagreement among Christians on the policy implications of the gospel, is the appropriate place for communal political dialogue based upon shared faith commitments. I thoroughly concur with Simon that a willingness to exchange ideas and make concessions is a necessary part of developing a Christian response to public policy and a prerequisite for carrying policy recommendations into the public square.

The strength of this well-written book is Simon's clarion call for Christian involvement and his belief that "everyone *can* make a difference." I was disappointed, however, that this book offers little new insight into what is unique about *how* Christians should engage in politics. Should we become more politically active by joining or forming more groups in order to lobby our special interests more effectively? Or should Christian political activity have distinctive purpose? Simon is critical of the low level of Christian involvement without evaluating the form and purpose that involvement should take.

In his shortest chapter, "Public Policy Groups," numerous organizations are presented as options for Christian involvement including single-issue groups, church lobbies, Christian think tanks, and public affairs groups lacking any confessional basis, such as the League of Women Voters. But Simon withholds all judgments about the merits of one particular type of interest group over another or of the potential hazards of a proliferation of Christian special interest groups. If Christian citizens are to be encouraged to get involved in a communal way, we need to know the kinds of groups to support and what strategy or purpose should direct the efforts of such groups. I am convinced that increasing "involvement" will not alone produce more public justice. American politics has already been reduced to a struggle among competing interests and I cannot believe Simon wants Christians to participate simply to promote their own concerns. But he does not explore how Christian political activity should be different, though such exploring must be part of any attempt by Christians to transform the political process and thereby alter public policies.

While my criticism, therefore, encourages Simon to press futher, it does not detract from his well-argued case for Christian political action. Both in language and length the

book is easily read and includes stimulating discussion questions for each chapter which make it especially adaptable for church groups, citizen associations, and as I have found, for classroom use.

Simon successfully brings together penetrating insights

Worship the Lord. Edited by James R. Esther and Donald J. Bruggink. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987. Reviewed by Joan M. Ringerwole, Professor of Music.

This attractive paperbound book contains all the liturgical forms needed for public worship in the Reformed Church of America. It was designed to be a liturgical companion to the Reformed Church's hymnal *Rejoice in the Lord: A Hymn Companion to the Scriptures*, edited by Erik Routley. The book is written in five parts: congregational services, occasional services, classical services, the directory for worship, and our song of hope.

In Part I, the *congregational services* are a model for a worship service (liturgy), the sacrament of baptism, reception into communicant membership, the ordination and installation of elders and deacons, and the preparatory exhortation before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. All are familiar forms to those of the Reformed faith with the exception of acceptance into communicant membership. This form is a highly structured way of examining candidates before the elders of the church. The second part of this form is to be used in examining the candidates before the congregation.

The occasional services in the second part of this book include the order of worship for marriage and burial. The services for marriage are similar in content to those which have existed previously in most Reformed churches. However, the addition of the burial service is a unique and valuable one, with the intention that the burial service in the church be an official church service. This service also could be an excellent guideline for ministers who wish to create their own service.

More unusual and perhaps debatable as an order of worship is the worship service: Orders for Christian Healing. Debatable issues might be the Litany of Intercession for Healing and the invitation to "invite worshippers to receive the laying on of hands and anointing with oil" (39). These elements are not customarily a part of the worship liturgy, and in this service they are added after the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There is also a service intended for the hospital.

The third part includes the ordination and installation services of a minister, the reception into the classis and installation of a minister of the Word, and a directory for reception into the classis and installation into a specialized

ministry. All these services are perhaps necessary, but appear somewhat too lengthy to be used in the service after the sermon.

A necessary and fourth part of the book is the directory for worship. If every church member studied these pages, I am sure all the aspects of worship would become more meaningful. Many books which contain forms and doctrinal confessions do not explain the meaning of worship or important elements of worship. Yet, it is extremely crucial to worship that these aspects are available to and understood by every member of the congregation. The various elements of worship all defined from a Reformed, biblical perspective can be an aid for every worshipper. This section is written in a concise way and with a direct approach telling what worship is about. Sermons could develop from the extensive list of definitions pertaining to worship, and the worshiper could study and follow along during the sermon. This section is so important that it could well have been placed first in this book.

Last of all is the Confession of Faith entitled "Our Song of Hope." It is presented in 21 verses in seven sections concluded by a prayer. Whether spoken or sung, one or several sections can easily be used within a worship service. The entire song, however, is very lengthy and if used entirely might consume a major part of the liturgy.

The content and quality of this book is superb with services which can satisfy both the conservative and liberal elements within the church. The models presented are structured and yet flexible.

Donald Bruggink has co-authored other excellent books on aspects of worship, notably *Christ and Architecture*. Therefore, he is a relatively known author; however, his co-author James R. Esther is not. Perhaps a discreet statement about these two people could have been included somewhere in this book, so that those outside the Reformed faith would gain some knowledge about them.

Many Reformed churches could benefit much by using this book in their services. I would also highly recommend it as an excellent resource for anyone who wishes to *Worship the Lord*.

Caring and Commitment: Learning to Live the Love We Promise. Lewis B. Smedes. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. 152 pp. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication.

In lively style, Smedes shows the important functions of commitment in long-term relationships. Given the present societal scene in which commitment appears to be declining, this thought-provoking book is a timely contribution. The significant place of commitment in marriage deserves book-length consideration.

Smedes focuses on commitments to people, not to institutions or beliefs. Part I, "The Celebration of Commitment," describes the nature of commitment, why people keep commitments, and the positive value in keeping them. Caring is the essential ingredient that keeps commitment alive. Part II, "The Commit-