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Politics after Christendom**

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Toward a Covenantal Christian Political Theology: A Review of Politics after Christendom

Abstract

"If all authority derives from God, it's necessary to look to covenant to understand the contours of the authority delegated to humans."

Posting about the book *Politics after Christendom* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Toward a Covenantal Christian Political Theology: A Review of *Politics after Christendom*

Donald Roth

January 10, 2023

Title: *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*

Author: David VanDrunen

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When it comes to Christian perspectives on politics, there are often more points of contention than concurrence; however, I see at least two common concerns in the works I've read in the past few years. First, there is a general acknowledgement that we are well into a new age in the West where our political configuration is increasingly post-Christian. Second, especially in America, there is a broad hunger for an account of politics that moves past the polarizing postures of the "culture war" narrative. In terms of these two concerns, David VanDrunen's *Politics after Christendom* provides a voice in the conversation worthy of consideration.

However, depending on the circles you run in, the thought of David VanDrunen is likely either relatively unknown or relatively controversial to you. One of my first scholarly efforts after taking up teaching was trying to conceptualize the tensions I encountered between the Reformed teaching represented by voices like VanDrunen and the Reformed teaching more in vogue around Dordt. I have taken some criticism for engaging with VanDrunen at all, even when I have points of disagreement with him.

This means that I have a difficult task in offering this review. First, I suspect the majority of readers of *In All Things* have little interest in the internecine squabbles that bleed ink all over certain corners of academia. At the same time, many in this audience might be keenly interested in what VanDrunen has to say. Second, however, there will be a significant number of you who are passionate about the issues that have fueled debate over VanDrunen's scholarship, and I count myself among you. Therefore, the needle I will endeavor to thread here is to offer an account of VanDrunen's thesis as well as critical engagement that neither totally loses the first group nor alienates the second.

To attempt this, I plan to address the key insights I find in VanDrunen's approach, what points of controversy some might find in it, and finally recommend the work for consideration by those looking to develop a vision for politics in a post-Christian world.

What insights does he offer?

Politics after Christendom represents both a summary and culmination of VanDrunen's developing thought around political theology. I have always appreciated his clear, concise writing style, and one of the first reasons I'm offering this review in this setting is that this book provides accessible depth in a field that can often be complex and difficult to follow.

However, it's not just the style that recommends considering this work. There are several substantive features of VanDrunen's thesis that offer a good pattern for Christian political theology in general. Specifically, VanDrunen's framework approach is appropriately limited, while his Biblical grounding and the covenantal intuitions that drive his approach are essential for an approach to politics that is genuinely Christian.

To begin, VanDrunen's approach is helpful not only in the substantive framework for engagement that he offers, but in the fact that he chooses to principally advocate a framework, rather than a policy platform. Christians are right to look to the Bible as the guide and foundation of our lives, but too often we do this by approaching the Bible as if it were a magic eight ball, doling out specific answers to all of our questions. In the world of politics, this too often turns into baptizing our policy preferences with an aura of biblical authority that they rarely authentically bear.

By working instead from a framework, VanDrunen recognizes the reality that the Bible is often underdetermined. This means that the Bible is not principally about the questions we want to ask, like "should I vote for bigger tax cuts?" Instead, the Bible puts boundaries around what human political authority is without offering its own comprehensive, prescriptive political theory or policy platform.

While the author maintains that many of the specifics of his framework are not unique, VanDrunen does present them in a helpful formulation: government is legitimate, but provisional, common, but accountable. By this, VanDrunen means that governments possess legitimate, God-given authority in human affairs; however, this authority is tied to this world, not the age to come. It is not redemptive. Further, governmental authority is tied to the well-being of all people (not just a favored faithful), but this common concern is not moral neutrality. Instead, all nations are charged with and will be held accountable for doing justice.

VanDrunen goes on to demonstrate the basic contours of his thesis drawing on a range of Scriptural support and thematic elements. It's possible to quibble with the particulars of what he does in grounding his approach, but I think it's essential that a Christian political theology include serious engagement with Scripture. Importantly, because the framework drawn from

Scripture doesn't answer every possible question, there is room for other philosophical approaches to step in and (less authoritatively) seek to resolve more nuanced issues. VanDrunen himself spends the latter half of the book engaging along these lines.

Most importantly from a Reformed perspective, VanDrunen's underlying intuition is to look to covenant as the touchstone that shapes relations between God and man. If all authority derives from God, it's necessary to look to covenant to understand the contours of the authority delegated to humans. Specifically, VanDrunen sees the warrant for civil government rooted in the covenant God makes with Noah after the flood. He sees this as a covenant of preservation until the time that God's salvific work is done, and VanDrunen works out most of his more specific applications from there.

Why might it be controversial?

While I think that the covenant impulse is thoroughly reflective of Reformed intuitions, VanDrunen's particular argument is, even by his own admission, somewhat novel. It also sits in self-aware critique of its theological siblings in Neocalvinist/Reformational circles, and, as often happens in daily life, family squabbles can take on a sharp edge quite quickly. While VanDrunen is more clear than combative about where he differs, criticisms of his thought can be quite strident coming in from other Reformed circles.

In order to attend to the dual purposes that I laid out at the beginning, I should disclose that I would consider myself an appreciative critic of VanDrunen's work. I use his book in a jurisprudence course for Dordt's MPA program, and VanDrunen's clarifying engagement with other authors that I use in the course has been greatly appreciated by my students. That said, I consider myself more in the Neocalvinist camp overall, and I find myself on the other side of a few distinctions that VanDrunen makes.

First, the author distinguishes his view of God's preserving work from the traditional Neocalvinist view that "grace restores nature." VanDrunen instead maintains that common grace preserves nature, while special (redemptive) grace achieves its original purpose. I appreciate the nuance added by distinction, and I agree that grace serves varied purposes, but I agree with Kuyper and other earlier Neocalvinists that common grace serves a more preparatory purpose that is not merely preservative.

I suspect the nuances of this argument might lose some of you, so I will leave the first critique at that, but I mention it because it also serves as an example of my second concern. Overall, I think VanDrunen's thesis draws too neat of divisions. I'll allow myself to dive a little into the weeds for an example: VanDrunen follows Kuyper and many Christian thinkers in considering family as part of the civil sphere. This is in part because the family as institution is grounded in the created order, not Christ's redemptive work. It is also because the family fits the mold of an institution that pertains primarily to this age. In many ways, the family is the foundational unit

of civil society, and so I think it is appropriate that VanDrunen (and Kuyper) think of it largely in this sphere.

However, this sharp distinction creates problems. First, the family has a clear role in the redemptive covenant as much as what VanDrunen identifies as the Noahic one. Children born to believers are counted as “holy”; parents are charged with religious instruction for their children, and God’s relation to His people as a whole is described as a fulfillment of the concept we first learn as “family” through our adoption into Christ’s royal family. In other words, family is somewhat of a “hybrid” institution that is not normed solely by one covenant relationship. There are good reasons why it might be unique in blurring these lines, but I think there’s a strong case that it’s at least one example that clearly does so.

Why would this matter? The second problem with the sharp distinction is that the identification of the covenants relevant to each sphere leaves an institution like the family looking to the Noahic covenant for a general framework, rather than more specific guidance. While I think VanDrunen’s framework is helpful in conceptualizing an approach to government itself, it seems to me clearly inadequate for addressing a Christian family. If both government and family are parts of the civil sphere, I start to wonder if VanDrunen’s approach is more helpful with the specific institution of government, but less useful as an approach to the civil sphere as a whole.

In short, I think VanDrunen pulls our attention helpfully toward covenant as the grounding of Christian political theology, and I think he clearly falls within certain lines of the Reformed tradition. However, I would quibble with a significant amount of his application from there.

Why is it nevertheless worthwhile?

Overall, *Politics After Christendom* is an edifying book that provokes the right sort of conversation. Where it stands in contrast to Reformational voices, it provides an opportunity for iron sharpening that will help further refine Christian political thought. Where the book’s thesis is grounded in Scripture with a clear-eyed sense of the costs and benefits of the history of Christian influence in the West, it provides a stronger grounding than many of the works on political theology found in broader evangelicalism.

Further, VanDrunen offers valuable counsel when it comes to a Christian posture toward politics. He urges Christians to recognize the fleeting character of life, moving us past the constant life-or-death rhetoric of the 24-hour news cycle toward a more Christian sense of patience. In contrast to the temporary character of victory or defeat in this world, he urges us to turn our confidence to the Lord and His ultimate victory. From this confidence, VanDrunen argues that Christians can be truly charitable, compassionate, and cheerful. In that way, Christians can be a faithful presence, presenting peace in a turbulent world and shalom that provokes the world to ask us about its source.

VanDrunen's counsel helps move the Christian political vision past its deep entanglement with cultural dominance. It does so in a way that neither encourages us to abandon the world for a new monasticism nor compromise our witness in exchange for another 15 minutes in the spotlight. This is the sort of posture Christians need to pursue, and, even though I disagree with several parts of it, I genuinely commend this book to anyone interested in refining their perspective on Christianity and politics.