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# Pro Rege

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Volume 4 | Number 4

Article 3

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June 1976

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### Recommended Citation

Hulst, John B. (1976) "Christian's Responsibility in the Political Arena," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 4: No. 4, 17 - 25.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol4/iss4/3](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol4/iss4/3)

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# The Christian's Responsibility in the Political Arena

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by John B. Hulst  
Dean of Students



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The following is a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held on the campus of the Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi - December 29-31, 1976.

It is my concern in this paper to speak to the matter of politics and the Christian's involvement in politics.

When I speak of politics I have something specific in mind, which makes it necessary for me to define the terms "state," "government," and "politics." Throughout this paper, when speaking of the "state," I will be thinking of a community of citizens called to administer justice within a given territory. When speaking of "government," I will have in mind officers called, appointed, and given authority to execute justice within the state. And when speaking of "politics," I will be speaking of that activity whereby justice is done through the institution of government within the sphere of the state.

You will notice, of course, that central to all three definitions is the idea of justice and the belief that it is the task of government to implement justice. This is a belief based upon the biblical teaching of passages such as Amos 5 and Romans 13.

Having made clear that the concern of this paper is politics, and having defined what we mean by politics or political activity, I wish in the time remaining to posit three things:

- 1) That Christians have a political responsibility.
- 2) That Christians must fulfill their political responsibility christianly, that is, as Christians and according to the demands of the Word of God.
- 3) That Christians must fulfill their political responsibility in communion with

other Christians.

In order to accomplish this I wish, first, to call your attention to -

### Three Wrong Views

As I have already indicated, I wish to posit that Christians have a political responsibility, which must be fulfilled christianly and in communion with other Christians. I realize, of course, that there are many evangelical Christians who would disagree with me on each of these points. I am convinced that their disagreement is reflective of wrong views, which I shall presently evaluate and criticize. Doing so, however, I wish to make clear that I regard those with whom I disagree as brothers in Christ and I intend to treat them as such.

First, there are those who deny that Christians have a political responsibility. In the introduction to Paul Henry's book Politics for Evangelicals (Judson Press, 1974), Senator Mark Hatfield makes clear that, while many evangelicals believe in the goodness of our nation, they have felt that -

...politics is intrinsically "dirty business." The political system is "of the world" and inevitably corrupt. Christians should avoid involvement with "politics," and instead concentrate their energies on spiritual goals.... Frequently I am asked by fellow Christians, "How can you be involved in politics and still be a good Christian?" That is the question prompted by the conviction that politics demands inevitable compromises with the evil of the world. (p. 8)

The objections to political involvement on the part of Christians come to expression in various ways. Some say the world is evil and Christians must refrain from contact with the world. Further, because the world is so evil, all efforts to change the world are bound to fail. Others insist that the Christian's sole responsibility is to win souls and bring people into the

church; and the message needed to accomplish this is a "spiritual" rather than a "social" message. Still others claim that Christians should be concerned primarily with individual piety; they should not allow such things as political involvement to distract them from their primary concern, namely, their personal spiritual condition. Then there are those who say we should keep the church and the state separate; we should not mix religion and politics. Finally, to mention no more, there is that well-known argument that politics is dirty and should, by all means, be avoided by the Christian.

Those who speak in the ways described above do so because they fail to acknowledge the full implications of the kingship of Jesus Christ over every aspect of life. They limit the kingship of Jesus Christ to the religious, spiritual, or ecclesiastical aspect of life.

Second, there are those Christians who, though they acknowledge that Christians do have a political responsibility, tend to view that responsibility from a dualistic perspective on life. They either state or imply that Christians may function christianly in the church and "neutrally" in the state; that Christians are to live according to the Word of God in the church and according to some other word, e.g. the will of the majority, in the state.

This dualistic perspective is well described by Dr. Bob Goudzwaard in A Christian Political Option (Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972). In a chapter entitled "Contemporary Christian Social Reflection" Goudzwaard describes the concept of a "responsible society" as set forth in 1948 by the World Council of Churches. Listen to what he says:

The main thrust of this idea was that society should be founded on the liberty of people who perceive themselves to be responsible for justice and public order, and that those who possess political or economic authority in society are accountable to God and to the people whose

welfare depends upon their authority.

It must be pointed out that this idea of a "responsible society" was intended as an idea which Christians and non-Christians could unite around.

We recognize in the background a strong Lutheran influence on the original thought climate of the Council. According to the two realm concept of Luther, the Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms: that of this world, and that of the kingdom of heaven. He shares his earthly citizenship with non-Christians; the same divine laws hold for Christian and non-Christian, and they can be understood and honoured equally by both. Thus the idea of a responsible society is not thought to be specifically a Christian idea, but the formulation of a societal law around which all well-meaning people, regardless of their faith, can unite. (p. 21)

This dualistic perspective is set forth by such as Paul Blanshard, who introduced his book God and Man in Washington (Beacon Press, 1960) with this paragraph:

The basic scheme of this book is quite simple. In the chapter on "One Nation under God," I try to describe the most important background items in the national religion-and-government panorama in Washington. Then, with constant emphasis upon the controversies that rage on the church-state frontier, I discuss the way in which the three great branches of our national government...confront religious issues. Then I close with a brief summary and exhortation in behalf of the neutral state as the best device for securing justice in a pluralistic society. (p. 9)

True to his promise, Blanshard concluded with this declaration: "We want no religious or anti-religious political parties." (p. 220)

A similar outlook is expressed by Jim Wright who, in 1970, was serving his eighth term as Representative from Fort Worth, Texas. Mr. Wright is an active member of the Presbyterian Church. He is also the author of an essay entitled "Legislation and the Will of God," which appears in a book edited by John B. Anderson, Congress and Conscience (J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970). In one part of his essay Mr. Wright opposes what he calls "self-righteous presumption." He does so in these words:

Compromise—not necessarily a dirty word—is the very essence of the political process. (p. 34)

To become completely convinced of the infallibility of one's personal predilections on a secular political issue, is to play God, to assume to one's self the attributes of deity. (p. 34)

At my age maybe I can go along, up to a point, with those who are irritated by modernism, and as a somewhat general matter I am opposed to socialism, but when they start jumping on ecumenism, then I think they have quit preaching and gone to meddling. (Me, I'm an ecumenist—a Presbyterian ecumenist, of course.) (p. 40)

Why do Blanshard and Wright express themselves as they do? Because they are living in terms of the dualistic idea of an independent natural realm ruled by natural laws and natural reason, existing alongside a supernatural realm ruled by Christ and the church. Because they have accepted the concept of "neutrality" which Rushdoony correctly calls "the major hypocrisy of American life, the assumption for all public purposes that all Americans share a common dedication to the general welfare, irrespective of race, color, or creed..."

(The Nature of the American System, The Craig Press, 1965, p. 68.) Ultimately, Blanshard and Wright deny that Christians can or should function as Christians in the political arena and that the Word of God speaks to the political aspect of life.

Third, there are those who, though they also acknowledge that Christians have a political responsibility, believe that that responsibility must be carried out individually rather than communally. Such may be willing to recognize the reality of "the communion of the saints" in the ecclesiastical sphere. But they believe that, when one moves outside the communion of the ecclesiastical sphere, one functions as an individual and should seek his political communion in a political party, in the context of which an individual Christian witness is to be brought.

This, it seems to me, is the emphasis of Christian political scientist Paul B. Henry. Henry recognizes what he calls "the interest group route" as a way of political involvement. And in the statement which follows he does speak of the importance of the Christian community. However, that community appears to be limited to the instituted church; and thus we sense a spirit of individualism in what Henry writes:

...while the church has an obligation to become involved at the educational and motivational level of politics, it has an equal obligation to separate itself from the implementational level of politics. Here the Christian lay person as a citizen of the world must act. He acts within the context of the shared insights of his fellow-believers in the Christian community as stimulated by prophetic social proclamation from the pulpit. And he is upheld by the prayerful support of his congregation. The church, in turn, can measure its own success or failure to the degree that it produces men of Christian conscience who are willing to

venture into the political world.

But how, then, can laymen become active in politics? (Politics for Evangelicals, Judson Press, 1974, pp. 112, 113)

There also appears to be something of the same spirit in the writings of Robert G. Clouse, Robert D. Linder, and Richard Pierard, editors of The Cross and the Flag (Creation House Publishers, 1972). In the introduction to this book they state that Christ's return "should find every believer faithfully working for Him both in the spiritual and in the social realms" (p. 21). Christians

must maintain a degree of independence with respect to all groups, movements, and organized agencies.... In short, the Christian must "hang loose" and take care to discharge his stewardship responsibilities faithfully in accordance with biblical precepts (p. 16).

James Skillen is correct when, in reviewing this book, he observes:

True Christianity, then, is evidently quite an individualistic affair in which the Christian's stewardship requires his independence from all groups and movements (International Reformed Bulletin, Fall 1973, p. 41).

Those who take this position do not do justice to the essentially communal character of life. They work from an individualistic perspective which, in the end, makes the Christian political task something which individual Christians can take up according to their individual insights.

I have already indicated that I disagree with these three views: the position which limits Christianity to the instituted church, the dualistic view, and the individualistic stance. I disagree because, while I respect my Christian brothers who hold these views, I am convinced that their positions reflect a confessional stance which is not fully in harmony with biblical teachings and results, therefore, in an erroneous

understanding of the Christian's political responsibility.

I wish therefore, at this juncture, to present what I believe to be -

### The Biblical Teaching

I have in mind the biblical teaching concerning the Kingdom, Covenant and Church; or, if you prefer, the biblical perspective concerning God, the world, man, and man's task in the world.

I come to the Scriptures as one who stands in the line of John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper. I find myself in whole-hearted agreement with one such as S. U. Zuidema of the Free University of Amsterdam. Zuidema has written an essay entitled "Church and Politics," which appears in the book Communication and Confrontation (Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972). In this essay Zuidema critically evaluates the dualistic view which "ecclesiasticizes" the Christian religion; that is, the view which limits the Christian religion to the sphere of the instituted church. In his evaluation he points out that "The ecclesiasticizing of religion necessarily calls into being the profaning of the non-ecclesiastical area" (p. 42), and that "The evil of the profanation of that area outside of the church unavoidably has its repercussions in a profanation of church life" (p. 45).

Zuidema goes on to show that such dualism fails to acknowledge the biblical teaching concerning the total embrace of the Covenant and the Kingdom of God. Doing so he states:

For—and here we hit upon the ultimate truth and reality, the firm foundation and all-encompassing horizon of our human existence—not the church but God's covenant, which He in His grace has recreated and granted in Christ, radically and totally encompasses man and humanity, church and world, churchman and politician. The purpose of the Covenant, in the measure in

which this Covenant extends itself over and penetrates into human existence—individually and in social relationships and communal bonds—is to bless this existence with the leaven of the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness. (p. 43)

Zuidema speaks as he does because of his world-and-life view—a view which I share with him—which is rooted, I believe, in a thoroughly and consistently biblical view of Kingdom, Covenant, and church; or of God, world, man and man's task in the world.

The Bible tells us that in the beginning God created all things, including man in His image and as His servant. In doing so God established His Kingdom. By His Word, God brought His creation into being (Ps. 33:6), upheld His creation (Heb. 1:3), and directed His creation unto His glory (Ps. 19:1). God brought the creation into being for His service.

Within that Kingdom setting God revealed Himself as a covenantal God, setting forth an agreement between Himself and creation whereby, through the service of God, the creation would be blessed. This covenant was to be realized through man (Gen. 1:27). Man was made king of creation under God (Gen. 1:28). Man was commissioned to work with and in the creation according to God's Word (Gen. 2:15) so that all creation might serve God and praise him. And, since Adam stood before God as representative of the whole human race, it is clear that man was to fulfill his covenantal responsibility, not in isolation, but in relationship with other men as part of the human community.

In the fall man made his declaration of independence, refusing to work in creation according to the law of God. Man broke covenant with God. Man no longer saw himself as God's servant-king. Man no longer acknowledged his duty to bring about God's Kingdom of service and praise.

But God determined to glorify Himself through the recreation, the restoration

of His creation. He came to man therefore with a Word of grace, of redemption. God re-established His covenant through Jesus Christ. In the fulness of time the Word of God—Jesus Christ—became flesh. Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ God redeemed His people (Col. 1:14) and reconciled the creation unto Himself (Col. 1:20). With the ascended Christ as King, God reclaimed the creation as His Kingdom (Rev. 5:11) and also restored man to covenantal fellowship with Himself, through faith, so that man might once again serve God in His creation, according to His Word

alism to universalism; it included all who by faith are incorporated into the body of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament Church lived under the kingship of Jesus Christ to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). Thus they proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. They heard and obeyed the Word of God in their political life (Acts 5), economic life (Acts 4), and in their juridical activities (I Cor. 6:1). The New Testament Church, there-

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and unto His glory (I Cor. 5:18 and I Peter 2:9). Those who are thus restored are called the new humanity (Eph. 2:15), made citizens of the Kingdom (Col. 1:13) and brought into the communion of believers called the Church.

Assuming that Adam and Eve believed the covenant promises, they constituted the first Christian Church; in fact, all those with whom God made covenant throughout the Old Testament constituted the Church. The Old Testament Church was called to serve God in the Kingdom land of Canaan. This meant worshipping at the Temple; but it also meant obedience to the Word of God in economics (Ex. 21), justice (Ex. 22), and medicine (Lev. 13, 14).

When Christ came to earth, performed His redemptive work, ascended into heaven and poured out His Spirit, the Church—a continuation of the Old Testament Church—came to include Gentiles as well as Jews. The Church moved from nation-

fore, recognized that it had been restored to covenantal fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, in order that it might live according to His Word for every part of His creation as citizens of His Kingdom.

One more thing concerning Christ's Church; there is a distinction which is to be made concerning that Church. Up to this point we have been speaking of the Church as organism--the body of believers, united in the Holy Spirit to one another and Christ as Head. But the Church also comes to expression in an institutional form through its offices and the ministry of the Word and sacraments.

This institutional form of the Church is clearly seen in the Old Testament in the days of Enoch, at Mount Sinai, in the ministries of the priests and Levites, and in connection with the synagogue. It is also to be observed in the New Testament especially when we see Christ select disciples and appoint apostles and, through

the apostles, appoint men to the temporary offices of evangelist and prophet and the permanent offices of elder and deacon. A specific task is assigned to the instituted church; a task which centers in the Word of God. The Word of God is to be preached (I Cor. 12:28). In connection with the Word, the sacraments are to be administered (Matt. 28:19) and discipline is to be exercised. Further, the instituted church (a distinct and central sphere within the Kingdom) must perform its preaching task for the sake of the body (Eph. 4:11) so that God's people may live the covenantal life in every other sphere of the Kingdom—the family, education, business, and the state. In other words—and this is why Zuidema spoke in the way he did about the total embrace of the Covenant and the Kingdom of God—the instituted church must perform its ministries so that the people of the Covenant, citizens of the Kingdom, members of the Body of Christ may be reminded and called to acknowledge that they are

an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that they may show forth the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Peter 2:9).

Having confessed this, I wish now to consider -

### The Christian's Political Responsibility

It should be clear, on the basis of our understanding of the biblical teaching, that the Christian does have a responsibility in the political arena. If we may use the distinction between a voluntary association (an association which arises from the voluntary intercourse of a group of like-minded individuals) and involuntary association (an association which is independent of human volition), it is obvious that the state is an involuntary association. We are citizens of a state and, therefore, like it or not, we have a political responsibility.

It is obvious, further, that we must

fulfill our political responsibility in acknowledgment of the kingship of Jesus Christ. It is contrary to Scripture to deny the kingship of Christ over every aspect of life. Christ is King over all aspects of life, including the sphere of the state, the institution of government and that activity which we call politics. As citizens we are responsible in this area. As Christian citizens we must exercise this responsibility in the light of Christ's universal kingship.

It should be clear, secondly, that the Christian must fulfill his political responsibility christianly, that is, as a Christian and according to the demands of the Word of God.

The Christian must fulfill his political responsibility as a Christian. The idea that Christians may function christianly in the church and neutrally in the sphere of the state is obviously contrary to the Scriptures. We cannot be satisfied with this limited perspective. To the contrary, it is the task of the church as institute to so proclaim the Word of God that God's people may live in every part of life—including the political—according to the demands of Christianity. All of life is religion. To the Christian that means that all of life must be lived according to the demands of the Christian religion. That's why Zuidema writes in Communication and Confrontation:

The church in its preaching and all its forms of pastoral care exists to proclaim the Word of God and the universal dominion of Christ over human existence. (p. 50)

Further, the Christian must fulfill his responsibility according to the demands of the Word of God. The notion that the Word of God speaks only to man's spiritual life and not to his political life is also contrary to the teachings of the Bible. That notion has had a "deforming" effect upon the political thinking of a large part of the Christian community. It has resulted in the idea that Christians function according to the will of God in the church



and according to the will of the majority or the dictates of a political party in the sphere of the state. It has also resulted in the idea that, because the Word of God speaks only to man's spiritual life, the Christian can fulfill whatever political responsibility he has by endeavoring to lead an individual politician to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Not so, for the Word of God speaks to politics as well as to the spiritual life of man. Jesus Christ exercises His kingship through His Word. Since His kingship is over all things, we may know that His Word speaks to every aspect of life. Yes, the Word of God must form and direct all of life, including the political. The Word of God must form our witness, including our political witness, so that through that witness we not only call men to repentance and faith, but also may make known the will of God concerning the nature, task and conduct of government itself.

Again we refer to the words of Zuidema in Communication and Confrontation:

...the life of state and politics can only retain its dignity, value and meaning when God's Word retains its divine authority over it and when this life is not lived outside of the admission of the indispensability of God's Word and his Christ. (p. 49)

It should be evident, finally, that the Christian must fulfill his political responsibility in covenantal communion with other Christians. It is not true that the Christian may or can function solely as an individual in the political arena. Indeed, as Christians, we must reject socialism but we must also reject individualism. As Hendrik Hart states in The Challenge of Our Age (Guardian Publishing Company, 1968):

Life in the Kingdom of God is the fulness of life in subjection to God's Word in communion with the Holy Spirit.... Since the way of life is communal and since each individual life is

a life of membership in that body, the question of how a specific job must be done Christianly is again shown to be improperly focused if seen by itself. There are varieties of gifts but one spirit, many members but one body. The totality of this body with its many members and variety of gifts is a community in the true sense of the word. In the one spirit of that community all the members communicate. (p. 1)

No, we have not fulfilled our political responsibility by presenting an individual witness in the political arena. Nor have we fulfilled our responsibility by seeing to it that a Christian individual is elected for a political position.

The communion of the saints must be present wherever God's people are and whatever God's people do. Thus, in the midst of the Corinthians' tensions, Paul wrote: "Now ye are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Therefore, just as God calls us to unite in worship around the pulpit and the table of the Lord, so also we are called to unite in the performance of our Christian political responsibilities. We must think and act communally in the political arena. In doing the political will of God we need one another; we are members of one another, a hand and a foot to each other.

We understand, therefore, that Christians do have a political responsibility which is to be fulfilled by them as Christians, in community with other Christians, according to the demands of the Word of God.

And what is that Christian responsibility?

The Christian's responsibility in the political arena is not to promote a specific type of government. God has not revealed an ideal form of government to us. As James Skillen writes in an essay "Toward an Understanding of Politics and Government from a Christian Point of View"

(Christian Politics: False Hope or Biblical Demand? published by the National Association for Christian Political Action, 1974):

We have not been given some frozen ideal form of political society such as David's monarchy or the original constitutional order of American federalism as our "Christian" norm. To the contrary, the Gospel norm of life, including public justice for political society, requires that we give actual responsible attention to the current social configurations and circumstances of the political communities in which we live and of the world political order as a whole...As Christians we must face this state of affairs and seek new ways to obey the Lord in our political responsibilities. (p. 31)

Nor is it the Christian's responsibility to transform the state into a commonwealth of confessing Christians. Thus Skillen writes, and correctly so I believe:

The commands of Christ do not include any directive to Christians to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, or to crusade later on in the old territory of Israel to destroy Islam, or to establish on some new continent in the seventeenth century a "true" nation of God's people as over-against all false nations. (*Ibid.*, p. 27)

What then is the Christian's political responsibility? In the beginning of this paper we sought to make clear that the state is a public community which integrates a variety of communities within its territory into a legal relationship of justice for all. The responsibility of the state is solely that of guaranteeing public justice. And it is the duty of Christians, therefore, to seek

to implement the gracious divine norm of justice for every person and social community within the state, including non-Christian

persons and communities, even where and when the Christian view of life is held by a majority of citizens within that political community... The norm for politics is not: "Christians transforming the state into a church for God by force," but: "God transforming politics into true justice for men through Christian obedience." (Skillen, *Ibid.*, p. 28)

Much more must be said concerning the specific nature of the Christian's political responsibility. But, lest I be accused of trying to say the last word, I will conclude at this point. I would do so by issuing a call to the Christian community to work to fulfill its political responsibility. It is a call to Christian political scholars to work toward a greater understanding of God's will for politics. It is a call to God's people to support the work of Christian political scholarship and to unite in proclaiming and applying God's Word for government.

I know that there are many who have a very pessimistic attitude regarding the significance and the effectiveness of Christian political action. In concluding, I would remind the pessimists and everyone reading this piece of the truth articulated by H. Evan Runner in Scriptural Religion and Political Task (Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, Toronto):

Christian political work is an integral aspect of our Christian life. It has nothing to do with winning. Of course, in any political action one is eager to acquire the power to give direction to the life of the State, which, in virtue of its office, has the power of the sword. But, like the rest of the Christian life, political life is first of all a witness. It is a witness to the direction this aspect (too) of our life must take from out of the Word of God if we are to be saved. (p. 27)