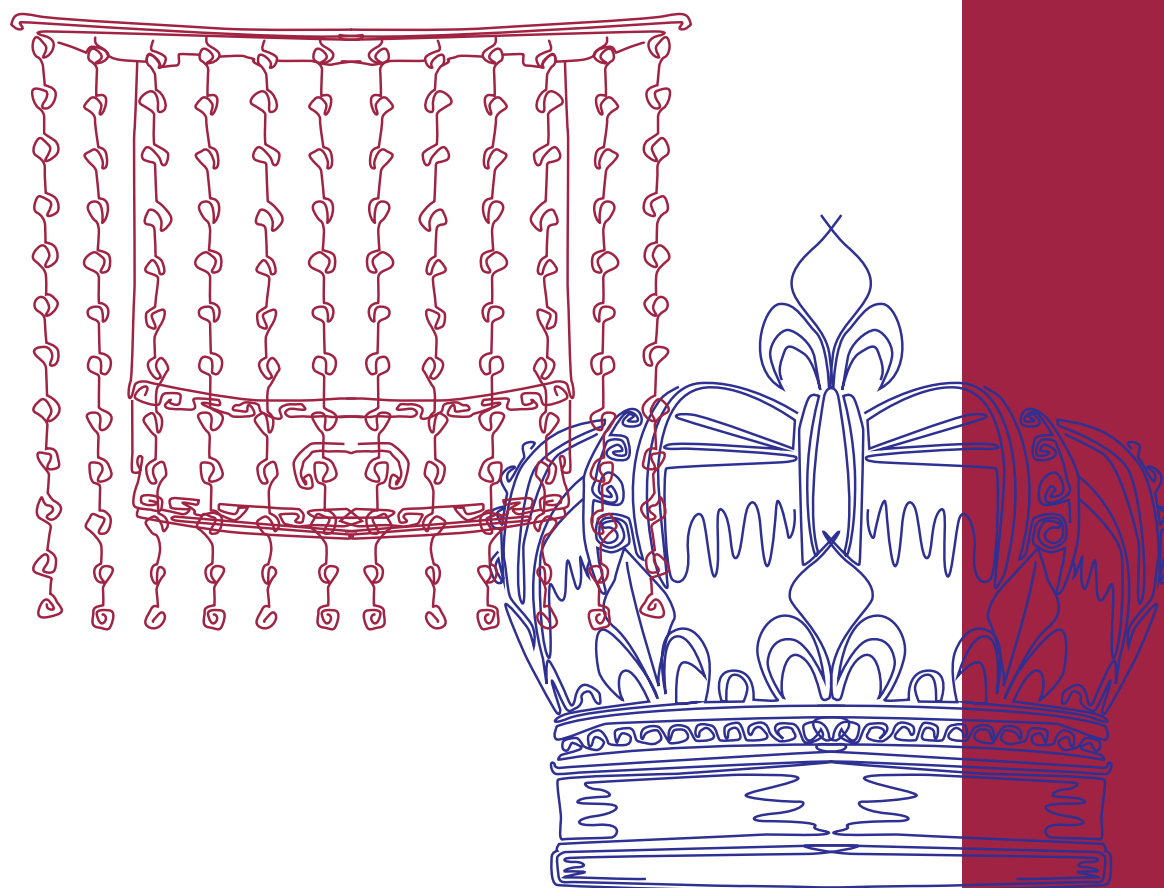


# THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE GOSPEL

BY GAO HANG



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Theology





## Editor's note

This essay touches on a key issue for the Chinese House Church—that of its political situation under a ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that remains hostile to its very existence. With leaders chosen behind closed doors, the citizenry does not have an active say in the political structures of their country, province, city, or township, a situation largely foreign to the modern Western experience. This perhaps has made it easy for most house churches to avoid the topic in their preaching and teaching. However, while the house churches in China have traditionally sought to avoid the topic of politics, Gao Hang points out an important reality that cannot be circumvented: the church's very existence is by nature a political existence, even more so in Communist China.

Wang Mingdao (1900-1991) was an extremely influential figure in the history of the house church. His instruction aimed at encouraging holy living in separation from a sinful world. Wang's theology is perhaps best described as individually pietistic and revivalist. At face value, his ministry appears to have been as far from a political statement as one can imagine. However, Wang's ministry was unavoidably political in nature. Twice he resisted the efforts of ruling powers to force him to join a state-affiliated church, the first time during the Japanese occupation of WWII, and the second under the CCP in the 1950s. Wang may not have viewed the church as a political entity, but the CCP thought differently. Wang would not be able to avoid its demands to join the Party-run Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) without significant repercussions. His refusal to join led to Wang serving

twenty-four years of a life sentence in prison as a counterrevolutionary, the CCP's version of an enemy of the state, a political criminal. Many churches would follow Wang's lead in accepting the suffering that resulted from subversive resistance to joining the TSPM and operating under the CCP. Those churches would become China's nascent house churches, and as diverse as they have grown to be today, they continue sharing in Wang Mingdao's refusal to accept another head of the church, other than Jesus. So today, whether recognized by the house churches themselves or not, the Chinese house church remains one of the most political entities in contemporary China.

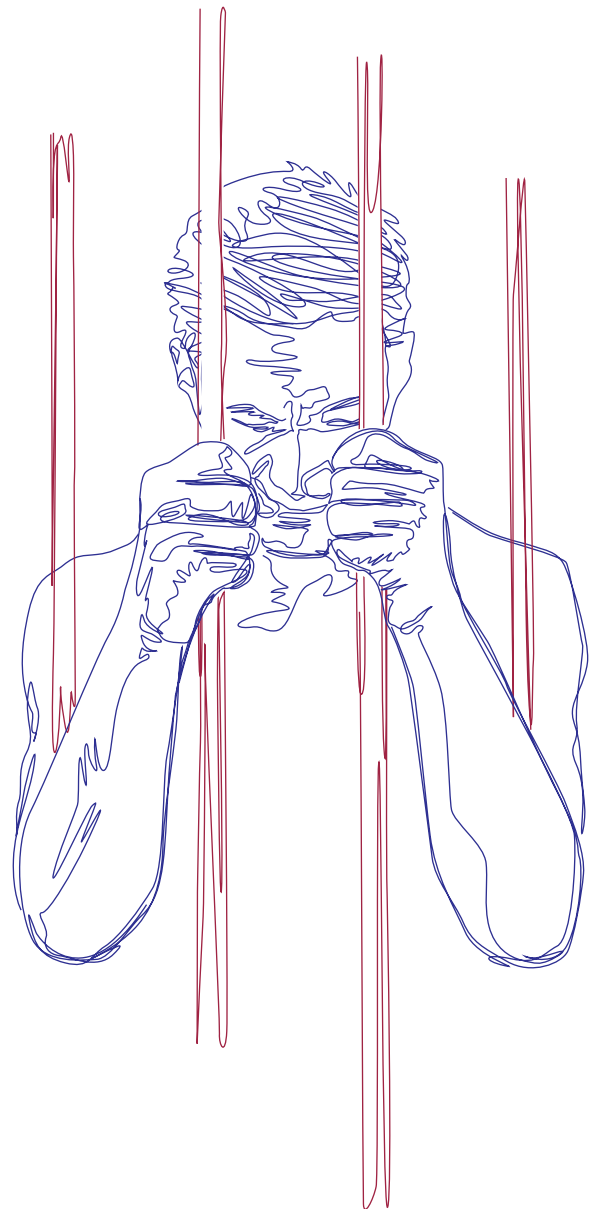
The gospel is a kingdom story. As such, the church's very existence is a manifestation of a kingdom that bows to an alternate king than the kings of this world, that loves a single master rather than two. In this sense, it is made political by the kingdoms of the world who require their people's highest allegiance and ultimate submission, asking of their people, "Who do you love?" It is this important point that Gao Hang brings to light in his essay.

In terms of public theology, it can be difficult to locate theologians from contexts of persecution. Gao's prescriptions avoid both the Anabaptist withdrawal position common among traditional Chinese House churches, and the liberal theological streams that equate Christ with culture. His keen avoidance of dualism brings to mind the One-Kingdom stance developed within western Reformed theology, yet his context fosters a skepticism of culture unlike much of Kuyperianism. This skepticism is to be expected under an openly atheistic regime in a culture that is largely free from



Christian influence and as such, limits the use of Western theological labels. As D.A. Carson has written, "If Abraham Kuyper had grown up under the conditions of the killing fields of Cambodia, one suspects his view of the relationship between Christianity and the culture would have been significantly modified."<sup>1</sup>

Regardless, the political nature of the church is a reality no matter where one might fall in terms of Niebuhrian categories of Christ and culture or public theological positions. In the West, we often need to be reminded of this reality. In Gao Hang's context as a Christian in modern Mainland China, the reminder comes in each report of a house church raid or closure. In a West that increasingly seeks to marginalize the church, there is much to learn from theologians like him.



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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), ix.



I am going to attempt in this article to explore a slightly complicated and possibly controversial issue.

I have not framed this issue in terms of “the relationship between faith and politics” or “the relationship between church and state” because when stated this way, it presupposes a kind of “dualism” that implies that faith is disconnected from politics or that the church is disconnected from government. It implies that these realms are in opposition to each other.

I have framed this issue as “the political dimension of the gospel.” I want to express the truth that there is a political dimension to the gospel that has practical application without the need for relying (intentionally or unintentionally) on modern political concepts. Of course, I must be very careful as I defend this claim because it may provoke many misunderstandings.

I must first state that my intention for writing this article is to explore the gospel message from a perspective that some may have overlooked, and to do so based on the Bible. I believe that this discussion is meaningful for Christians as they practice their faith in this modern world.

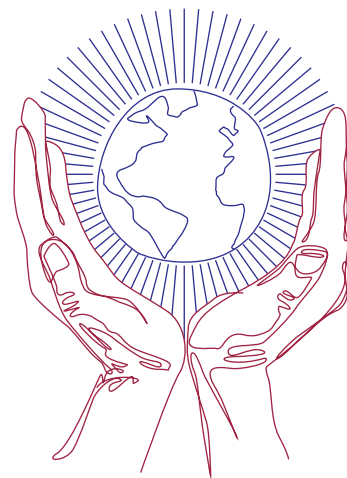
## The Gospel: A Political Image

First, I would like to pose a question.

In the New Testament, both Jesus and his apostles express the gospel in very rich terms, both in form and in content (although, of course, the core tenets of the gospel do not change). These expressions of

the gospel are different from those formulaic statements of faith that modern Christians are often taught and imbibe. Different themes and images present the gospel to Bible readers from different perspectives, for example “God’s salvation and redemption of his people,” “covenant keeping,” “sacrifice,” “the coming of God’s kingdom,” “returning to the garden of God,” “joining the banquet of God,” “God’s planting and harvesting of crops,” “God’s leading, shepherding, and retrieving of his flock,” and so on. But we seldom point out that these various pictures of the gospel contain clear political elements. Many times, even when we come across obvious political terms (such as the “kingdom of God”), we tend to give them “apolitical” interpretations.

We must consider whether these interpretations of the gospel clearly and sufficiently reflect the meaning of scripture. After all, the gospel presentations



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of Jesus and his apostles are laden with terms like “nation,” “army,” “king,” “judgment,” and “justice.” Are these not, first and foremost, political terms? Even the term “church,” when it refers to a gathering of people, used the term *ἐκκλησία* which refers to a civic assembly, and not to a gathering held for ethnic, economic, or educational purposes. Paul also uses a lot of ink discussing polity. It is true that both Jesus and his apostles correct certain “political” interpretations of the gospel, for example by emphasizing, “My kingdom is not of this world,” but even in this statement, the word “kingdom” is used in a positive way. He simply points out that this kingdom is “not of this world.”

So have we missed something?

Paul says:

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace*

*to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. —Ephesians 2:11-19*

Paul here naturally expresses the gospel in a brilliant yet clear way. The gospel of Christ has united two groups of people—the Gentiles and the Jews—who once had no dealings with each other. There are several important themes in this expression of the gospel, such as covenant, sacrifice, law, and peace. But there is another theme that is equally obvious—“kingdom.” In verse 12, Paul says that in their original state, the Gentiles were separated from God and had no relationship with him. They were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” The term used here is *πολιτεία*. This word had significant political import at that time. It referred to the political system and citizenship of a city-state, and, in a broader sense, to political order. Then, in verse 19, Paul says that because of the gospel, the Gentiles are no longer “strangers” (*ξένος*) and “aliens” (*πάροικος*). In the context of that time, the former word referred to outsiders who have lived in a city for a long time and enjoy many benefits (possibly because of a treaty or traditional customs of hospitality) but do not possess citizenship. The latter refers to a complete outsider or stranger. The differences in political status between these two kinds of people and citizens are very clear and distinct. Paul goes on to say that they are now “fellow citizens” (*συμπολίτης*). This word means “fellow countrymen,” that is, citizens of the same city-state.



So in this passage, Paul uses several words, one after another, that all have quite strong political connotations. With these words, Paul paints a picture that suggests that the gospel has created a completely new kind of relationship or structure that can be appropriately described in political terms. Modern readers may intuitively feel that this description is merely “figurative.” But there is one small problem—when Paul said this, the church was not yet a universally accepted entity. In other words, readers at that time did not, like modern readers, think of the church as an institution or organization completely distinct from a political group. Therefore, although modern readers are more likely to understand this as a metaphor, readers in Paul’s day would not have been able to identify a metaphor here. It would be very unlikely that ancient readers (especially Greeks—Paul is addressing Greeks here) would have missed the obvious political implications of this way of expressing the gospel.

Another obvious example is the use of the term “church” (ἐκκλησία) in the New Testament. As mentioned above, the term itself refers to a civic assembly of a city-state, a political assembly with the highest authority. To the Greeks at that time, the word had a very strong political meaning, and the New Testament uses this word to refer to the church.

The only time this word appears in the Gospels is in chapters 16 and 18 of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus mentions the word “church” twice, and both times

he is talking about the authority of the church. The second mention of the word even touches on specific disciplinary procedures.<sup>2</sup> The first time “church” is mentioned in the Book of Acts is in chapter 5. Just after Ananias disobeys the apostles and is punished with death, we are told “great fear came upon the whole church.”

Therefore, we have good reason to ask: If New Testament writers wanted to express that the gospel was “unrelated to politics,” then why did they use political vocabulary so directly and without explanation? We at least have reason to say that the image of politics is one image that the New Testament uses to describe and present the gospel, and it is by no means an unimportant one.



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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:18 says, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Matthew 18:17 says, “If [the sinning brother or sister] still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”



## Why Politics?

If this is so, then we need to examine the Bible and rethink our typical assumptions. One notable trend we've seen since the time of the Renaissance is that the realm of so-called "politics" has gradually become independent. It has developed into a system of independent rules, vocabulary, values, and arguments. But we must ask ourselves: How does the Bible define politics?

*Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either*

*in this age or in the age to come." — Matthew 12:22-32*

This is a very interesting passage. Christians usually focus on the question of what "blasphemy against the Spirit" means, and then they proceed to focus on the spiritual process of "casting out demons." But we miss the strong political implications of Jesus's words in this passage.

This passage begins with Jesus casting out a demon. The people then declare, somewhat unconsciously, that he is the "son of David," the one who possesses kingship over Israel. The Pharisees appear in this story as the enemy and state that Jesus's power comes from the "prince of demons" (ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων). In response, Jesus mentions "kingdoms" (βασιλεία), "cities" (πόλις, i.e. city-states), and "houses" (οἰκία, i.e. families). These three entities were, for the ancients, the path to political order—from family to city-state, and then to an alliance of city-states or to a kingdom. Jesus points out that there is a specific situation that will disrupt order within any of these three political entities, namely when it is "divided against itself"—when there is division and civil unrest. The ancients had this same understanding of politics. In verse 28, Jesus says that what they are seeing is a fundamental change in the political order. Obviously, the kingdom of God (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) cannot experience civil unrest because the Holy Spirit, which brings new order, cannot be in conflict with God. Therefore, the Spirit eliminates the root cause of civil unrest. Consequently, when Jesus says in verse 31 that anyone who "speaks against the Holy Spirit" will not be forgiven, one implication of this is that attacking the Spirit who brings unity is



tantamount to rejecting or undermining the overall order of God's kingdom. It is to refuse to confess the kingdom of God and God's rule. It is to refuse to accept that God decides the means by which men must enter his kingdom. The one who commits this sin naturally cannot be saved.

It is interesting, however, that people often ignore verse 30. Jesus says, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." This statement comes immediately before his statement about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This may be one of the reasons why it is ignored. This statement, however, illustrates the principle of order (politics) in the kingdom of God. When the kingdom of God comes, it will result in two diametrically opposite acts: "gathering" (συνάγω) and "scattering" (σκορπίζω). Those who are united with Jesus will be gathered together and participate in his act of gathering, but those who are not united with Jesus will scatter. Jesus uses many obviously political words to describe and demonstrate how order is established in God's kingdom. In this sense, the gospel is expressed in political terms—people will gather together or divide because of Christ.

Going deeper now, how does Christ "gather" and "scatter" men? The answer is given just before this passage:

*This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;*

*a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope."*  
—Matthew 12:17-21

The means by which Jesus establishes God's kingdom order is through his humiliation, his mercy, and his righteousness. The Son entered the world and became a man. He was humbled to the point of death on a cross, by which he made full atonement for sinners. He was resurrected on the third day so that those who rely on faith and not works may receive his free grace. As a result, the people were divided and the church was formed. The kingdom of God is now visible in the world, and it reveals the glory of God. Jesus will come again in the future to execute judgment and fully reveal the kingdom of God.

The Bible paints for us a political image, but the political order of God's kingdom is centered on and defined by the incarnate Son Jesus and his sacrifice. The humble, crucified Christ is also at the center of the outworking of this political order, the gathering and scattering of men. Those who enter the kingdom of God must imitate Jesus in his suffering. And it is here that the politics of the kingdom of God are completely different from the politics of this world.

However, if we look at the world today, we will find that it is extremely difficult to imitate Christ.



## A Danger

As we've already discussed, the Bible teaches us that the gospel can be expressed and presented in strong political terms. The political order of God's kingdom is firmly established through the coming of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit as men are separated. This is politics.

But we need to consider why we are so apprehensive to connect the gospel, faith, and church to politics today. If the Bible gives us a political image, then why is it so obscure to us today?

The Bible does actually point out the dangers of political images of the gospel.

Revelation 13 depicts the actions of the Devil in this world. A great red dragon is standing on the shore of the sea, and a beast rises out of the sea. The beast has seven heads, one of which "seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed." The whole earth follows the beast and worships the dragon and the beast. Then another beast rises out of the earth. It exercises all of the authority of the first beast and places a "mark" on people.



Even though this passage is full of bizarre images and symbols, there is a basic pattern that is worth noting, namely that the Devil constantly imitates and impersonates the triune God through his actions. The dragon impersonates the Father, the first beast impersonates the Son, and the second beast impersonates the Holy Spirit. They imitate the death and resurrection of Christ. They imitate the descending of the Holy Spirit and his changing of men's hearts. They imitate God's calling all people together to worship him. The reason many will be deceived into worshiping the Devil is because he will quite successfully impersonate the triune God.

Now let us reflect on why so few people today talk about the Christ-centered "political order of God's kingdom" as revealed in the Bible. One relatively simple answer is that the activities of the Devil in this world imitate the political order of God's kingdom, which makes people suspicious of politics.

To oversimplify history a little bit, when the church was first established, it possessed clear external boundaries and an internal structure of government, as well as a community with its own specific order. The Roman Empire's persecution of the church was largely due to the fact that Rome, which was already

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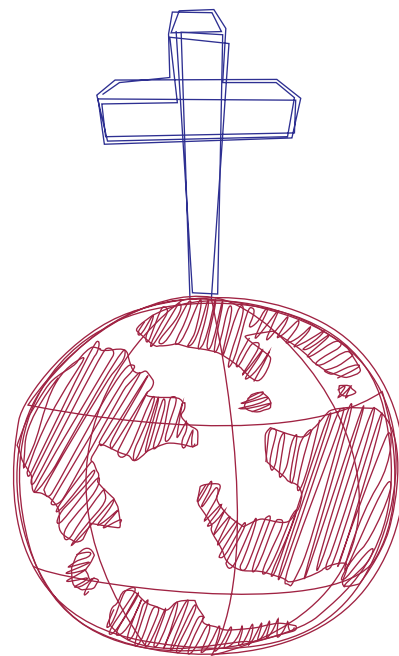
a very developed political entity in the world, had encountered a very strange group. The Romans realized that this was a completely different political order. This empire that, until that time, had tolerated (or suppressed) all ethnic groups, customs, or religions could not tolerate this group. Therefore, it had to eliminate them.

But when Constantine claimed to have converted to Christianity, things took a new turn. On the one hand, the empire appeared to significantly back away from its original stance. The state no longer persecuted the church—Christianity even became the official religion. On the other hand, there began a process of joint cooperation between the two political orders. To some extent, the empire dispelled the indelible and inescapable strangeness of the church that it previously encountered by imitating the church. This cooperation between the two gradually developed into a dual state-church structure during the Middle Ages. The two later worked in tandem with each other, integrating, implementing, and exchanging many of each other's ideas. In the late Middle Ages, we can see that while the church became secularized, the state simultaneously became "sanctified." As a result, the modern world was gradually formed on the basis of this system in which the state was deeply entangled with the church and theology.

The modern form of the state is unprecedented in history. In fact, it "imitates" the Christian church to a considerable degree in many respects. For example, it has a "founding myth" (often times an Exodus-like narrative of liberation); it has a classic document regarded as a sacred text (this may be a revolutionary manifesto or a constitution); it has

founding fathers who play the role of prophet or king (taking the form of monuments, statues, or even "immortal" embalmed bodies); it has a mechanism that "produces" truth (scholars playing the role of priest); it requires the allegiance of its members (through a pledge of allegiance); it recognizes "enemies" and engages in an intense struggle against them; it conducts special festivals and ceremonies in which the masses participate, and so on.

If we agree with my comments above, that the political nature of the gospel is exhibited in a kind of "gathering" and "scattering" where Christ is at the



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center (he is the standard and impetus), and this is specifically manifested in the form of the church, then the kind of “gathering” and “scattering” that the modern state engages in has something else at the center (a very different standard and impetus), and this is specifically manifested in the form of the nation-state. In a modern state, community may be formed on the basis of national identity or political ideology with various hidden motives driving them. This, in turn, results in a modern definition of “politics,” which also determines the distinction between politics and faith. The impetus that drives all of this may be described in terms of the pursuit of benefits or glory, or perhaps it is due to fear, or economic need, or a herd instinct. The discussion of such factors, and the large amount of research and literature produced as a result, has created a realm of politics that seemingly has no relation to religion.

If we agree with what the Bible says, that the Devil is good at imitating God, then we must consider a danger that the church of Christ faces in the modern world, namely that the church may unknowingly accept the various definitions and methods of politics imposed on us by the modern state. Since these definitions and methods appear to have many similarities with those promoted by Christianity, the church may readily accept them, which may lead to even more problems. For example, modern countries are based on identifying absolute enemies, and the standard by which they identify an enemy is certainly not the gospel of Jesus Christ. But when confronted with this idea of “differentiating oneself from the enemy,” churches find that the mentality of “fighting against the enemy” and “dividing people into groups” seem to have many similarities with the teachings of scripture,

and therefore the church accepts them without reflecting on the standards and impetus behind them.

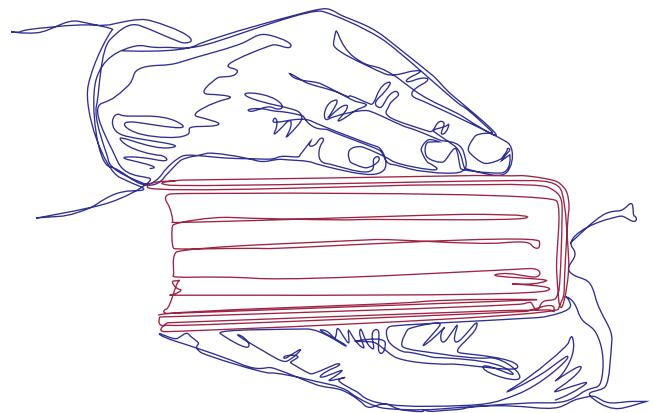
The greatest danger is that the church may deviate from the gospel of Christ and regard other things (maybe even the “fruits” of the gospel) as the standard and impetus for “gathering” and “scattering” people. A “feeling of love,” social justice, the political agenda of a political party, material prosperity, proper education, etc. may all be included in this list. Corresponding to this, the church in the modern world has increasingly lost its ability to identify and deal with true heresy in a clear and formal way. This may result, therefore, in the following predicament. On the one hand, an endless stream of heresies may emerge without being effectively dealt with. On the other hand, orthodox Christians may often treat each other as enemies the same way they do heretics. The church in the modern world, then, becomes incapable of reflecting that original political dimension of the gospel that seems strange to the world. At most, the church will step into the political realm of the world and act in accordance with the political and cultural definitions that the world is familiar with (even though it may appear “passionate” or “fruitful”).



## *Semper Reformanda*

If we want to consider how to cope with the political terrain of the world, then we must return again to the Protestant Reformation because the unstoppable force of the Reformation did not lie in its criticism of the corruption of the Roman church and the church's involvement in secular politics but in its contemplation, discrimination, and defense of important theological issues.

There were two issues that most concerned the Reformers and that they were even willing to divide over. The first concerned how someone is saved and how to determine whether he is saved. The second concerned how many sacraments there are and how to perform them. If we look at what issues the Reformers were concerned about from the perspective of the political dimension of the gospel, it is not hard to see how these two theological issues immediately point to the issue of identifying and regulating the community of the church—the reason for which people should gather, how they should gather, and how they should divide. In other words, what the Reformation claimed to be doing was recovering true Christianity and going back to the source. From this perspective, they were recovering the teachings about “gathering” and “scattering” as discussed and prescribed in scripture, that is they were recovering the correct political dimension of the gospel. In contrast, even though the errors of the Roman Catholic Church were evident in issues such as its selling of indulgences, the supremacy of the papacy, and the corruption of priests, the deeper error lay in its understanding and articulation of the gospel. In this respect, when the Catholic Church increasingly



pursued the power and glory of this world, it increasingly grew distant from the humble, sacrificial Jesus Christ and gradually strayed from the foundations of the political dimension of the gospel.

As the Reformation continued to develop, people's concern for soteriology and the sacraments revealed itself further in the doctrine of scripture, because as people pursued a clearer soteriology and sacramentology that was more in line with God's commands, this inevitably promoted a reverence for the Bible as our authority as well as a passion to study, translate, and teach it. And this translation work and study of the Bible continued, in turn, to promote more reformation within the church.



As time passed, the attention of Christians seemed to shift more and more from salvation, the sacraments, the church, and biblical prescriptions, which the Reformers were initially concerned about, to things that were happening in the world. This may be one of the bigger problems facing Christians in this modern age.

But sinners easily forget. As time passed, the attention of Christians seemed to shift more and more from salvation, the sacraments, the church, and biblical prescriptions, which the Reformers were initially concerned about, to things that were happening in the world. This may be one of the bigger problems facing Christians in this modern age. If the first question Christians consider is “how to be the church in the world,” then they will very likely discover that they must face considerable uncertainty because the happenings, trends, and “winds” of this world are inherently changing. Christians will rack their brains and exert great effort to try to understand these things. Their biggest question is, “The world has changed again—how should we adjust?” “Pastor, do you understand artificial intelligence and blockchain?” The political situation of the world, political “creeds,” and political culture are constantly changing. What should Christians do? As soon as we understand a

certain event, or implement a certain idea, or formulate a certain rebuttal, something new occurs, and Christians then hope to find a new response. As the church increasingly engages the world in this way, it increasingly loses its firm foundation, because this method of integration means continually changing with the tide.

This is emphatically not the definition of “reformation” that the Reformers had.

Of course, the times are changing. Our circumstances are different from theirs. But we should still be like the Reformers, yearning and striving to return to the source of scripture. When it comes to politics, we should still strive today to recover the political dimension of the gospel as revealed in scripture. How should we appropriately gather and divide today? It is still that ancient gospel alone that is able to respond to the complex and rapidly changing



(political) tides of this world. The Bible and the sacraments, which the Reformers paid great attention to, are still the starting point from which we must begin thinking about this issue.

Exalting scripture today means expository preaching. Taking the sacraments seriously means church polity. Scripture and the sacraments are basic articles of faith, and expository preaching and church polity are the ways by which we prudently apply these things in our present context.

The preacher should be jealous for the Bible, as scripture commands, and study it rigorously. He should use appropriate methods to unravel the meaning of scripture, and he should accept the teachings that he identifies in it. The preacher must rigorously exposit scripture as he builds up the church and summons the people of God with holy words to gather together, to listen to the word of God, to obey it, and to “exhort one another every day.” A Bible-centric community of Christians will necessarily allow God’s word to govern their own lives instead of exploiting it to fulfill their own personal desires.

As for the sacraments, one important purpose of baptism is to confirm and declare that a person has become a disciple of Christ and to accept him into the body of Christ. One purpose of communion, on the other hand, is to confirm that this person is united with Christ and to keep him in the body of Christ. In this respect, the sacraments actually constitute and safeguard the boundaries of this community of God’s people. A church that administers the sacraments with reverence must ask questions such as, What is the meaning of the

sacraments? Who can perform the sacraments? Who can receive the sacraments? Church polity does not exist for the sake of conveniently managing the church but is rather an inevitable fruit of the political dimension of the gospel.

The correct preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments cannot be separated from the work of the Holy Spirit. True believers are necessarily indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Those without true faith do not have the Spirit. Those who are indwelt by the Spirit will obey the word of God and receive all the benefits of the sacraments. If they do not have the Spirit, they will despise the word and must be excluded from the sacraments. The work of the Holy Spirit will not contradict the word and the sacraments. Through these he sets apart God’s people from the world and identifies heresies.





Our job is to interpret scripture correctly, to preach the word of God, to gather God's people together, to correctly administer the sacraments, and to edify and protect the community of God's people. The Holy Spirit's job is to reveal and summon God's people and to expel those who do not belong to this community. Taken together, all of this constitutes the political dimension of the gospel. The gospel gathers and divides men.

Finally, we must also realize that correctly preaching the word and administering the sacraments means continually preaching and testifying to the humble Christ who suffered and sacrificed himself for us. It is Christ himself who causes this gathering and dividing of men, which is very different from the way that the world gathers and divides.

The church does not need to apologize for appearing incompatible with or "indifferent" to the political activities of this world. Strictly speaking, the church does not need to do anything to prove to the world that apart from Christ and his crucifixion, we do not need to add anything to the gospel—no works or beliefs. The church does not need to be lured by the dreams, aspirations, and emotions of man in order to try to change the political order of this world. The church must simply use its very existence to force the world to see and encounter this strange but pure and beautiful order, to force it to see how their sin, as defined by scripture, can be dealt with, to force it to see how the glory of the living God is revealed in a group of sinners. Only in this way can the church consciously recognize and overcome the schemes of Satan as he impersonates God and the political order of his kingdom.

## Conclusion

The politics of today's world are multi-faceted and are changing at an incredible speed. Groups of people are dividing and uniting. People search out enemies to fight, but behind this hostility there is a deep sense of emptiness, and consequently they must continue fighting to cover up this emptiness. When they do this, it appears to give them life. People must define themselves by their enemies because they have no foundation beneath them on which they can rely.

On the one hand, the church cannot separate itself from the world and refuse to talk about politics; on the other hand, the church cannot define its mission as simply entering the world and approving or opposing a certain kind of politics. The church is a heavenly place that is in this world but not of it. Here, people are gathered and divided in ways that the world cannot imagine or understand, and its purpose is to preach and worship Christ who humbled himself, suffered, and died on a cross.

Satan may be able to imitate the death and resurrection of Christ, but he cannot imitate the cross because Satan's purpose is ultimately to steal glory from God. He cannot understand the grace of the Son giving up glory and hanging on a cross for sinners.

We do indeed live in a complex and often disheartening environment, but this means that we need the gospel of Christ alone. When Christ calls a man, he calls him to imitate him, to take up his cross, and to die. The tradition of the Chinese house church is not just "Do not follow the state religion." At its



deepest level, it is a willingness to suffer and bear the cross. Many of the saints before us may not have had a good theological foundation, but they expressed the beauty and strangeness of the gospel to the world in a remarkable way. Perhaps there is a special need for us Christians today to express the gospel in the same way and to do so on clear, theological foundations.



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