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Christian Action and the Coming of God's Kingdom

James Skillen

How should our political action be guided by our faith in the coming of God's kingdom? How does our knowledge of the future impinge upon our political life in the present age? To answer these questions, we must first understand that the biblical revelation calls us to respond to God with our whole life in the service of our neighbors. It does not allow for either "quietism" or "activism." By "quietism" I mean an attitude that has, unfortunately, characterized Christians for centuries, namely, a sense of hopelessness about life in this world. Or, if not hopelessness, at least a strong doubt that Christians can have much effect on life in this world, especially on political life. The consequence of such an attitude is for Christians to hold back, quietly, from serious reforming engagement in the affairs of this world. By "activism" I mean almost the opposite attitude—a conviction that Christians can change the world to such an extent that the primary motivation for their efforts here and now is the hope of transforming this world into the kingdom of God through political, economic, educational, and evangelistic good deeds.

By contrast, the biblical picture of God's people living and working expectantly for the coming of the kingdom is neither quietistic nor activist. It is a picture of God's people working diligently in all areas of life, including politics, knowing that God will bring all things to completion and fulfillment in His kingdom through His Son, Jesus Christ. Our attitude ought to be one of confidence that in Christ there is an intimate connection between this world and the coming kingdom, that there is no radical discontinuity between our labor in this world and our fulfillment in the next. But the coming kingdom is in God's hands not ours.

The Creation's Sabbath Structure

This is directly relevant for politics, because it is in political life that quietism and activism show up most clearly among Christians. In an attempt to overcome this

problem, I would like to consider a particular characteristic of the biblical revelation that begins to unfold in the very first chapter of Genesis. That characteristic is the seven-day, sabbatical structure of the creation. Although the first chapter of Genesis in the English Bible concludes with the end of the sixth day, the whole story of creation in the Hebrew text includes the description, in 2:1-4, of the seventh day, the sabbath rest into which God Himself entered after His labor. This sabbatical pattern as a whole forms the context for God's revelation of Himself to Israel and for the final revelation of Jesus Christ.

In the Genesis passage we see that the days of creation are quite distinct in character. There are days and nights, and the day of the sun and the moon is a different day from the day of the plants; the day of plants is different from the day of separation between waters and dry land. Moreover, we see that the day of man, the day of human beings, is a different kind of day than the sabbath rest of God—the day in which God enters into His rest. Yet at the same time, it is also clear that all of the days are integrally wrapped up together as parts of *one* creation. The creation is not a separate six-day entity, contained in itself and set apart, from God's seventh day of rest. God's resting is directly related to His laboring. The seventh day is not another world; it is the climax, the completion, the culmination of God's one creation.

Or, one could say from another angle that human creatures are quite "other" than the creatures made on the other days. We are not plants or fish or stars. Nevertheless, the day of human life is wrapped up with all the days of the creation. We cannot live without the plants; we cannot live without the dry land and the water. And we cannot live without anticipating the day of climactic fulfillment and rest. There are obvious differences among God's creatures. Water is not sunshine; humans are different from plants. But they are all part of a single unified, interdependent creation that exists to reveal God and to enjoy His sabbatical blessing.

As the biblical story unfolds, this picture provides the setting for our human place and task on earth. In the beginning God gave His image, male and female, the responsibility of dominion and stewardship in the creation. We have our identity and purpose in the context of caring for the rest of the creation, caring for one another, and looking forward to the culmination of all things in God's final day of rest. Abraham looked ahead to the city that God Himself would make (Heb. 11:10). The author of the letter to the Hebrews, particularly in chapters 3 and 4, develops this dynamic image. A sabbath rest, he says, has been promised to the people of God; it is the very thing that they have been anticipating from the beginning. And the rest which has been promised them is God's own sabbath day (Heb. 4:1-11).

We need to keep this revelation in mind in order to understand politics and the future. The coming age is a new age, but it is the completion, the fulfillment of this age. It is the restoration of what was lost in our sin, but also the completion of the creation which has existed from the beginning as a seven-day creation. In Christ we have been given the promise of entering God's rest. Therefore, the final triumph, the final coming of Christ, the new heaven and new earth, the new age—all of those aspects of the future which might seem to suggest a discontinuity, a break with the present world, are really aspects of sabbatical fulfillment of God's single creation. The radical newness of the future is not a symbol of the destruction of God's first creation but rather the sign of perfect fulfillment of what God has been doing from the beginning. A close continuity exists between what we are doing now and what we will be doing then in politics as in the rest of life.

Let me give just one simple illustration. Some Christians have emphasized the discontinuity between this age and the next age so strongly that they expect heaven to be the end or the negation of marriage. After all, they say, doesn't the Scripture say that in heaven there will be no marriage or giving in marriage (Matt. 22:30)? But for Christians who are enjoying loving marriages now, such a heaven might not be a very exciting prospect. Heaven, in that sense, represents the end of marriage. It is a negation of life in this world. It seems to me that this outlook is fundamentally unbiblical. Granted, heaven, as the new age, will be unlike what we now know in the sense of being the perfect completion and fulfillment of life in Christ. However, everything in the Bible testifies that the new age is going to be the perfect fulfillment of all that God has intended for His creation and for His people. Marriage, then, will be *more complete* than it is now. Marriage will not be negated but fulfilled.

Of course, the biblical revelation does testify to the purging fire of judgment. There is judgment and trial by fire, and only gold" will get through to the kingdom. We can be thankful that all the chaff, all the rottenness of our sin, will be destroyed. A judgment is coming which will indeed create a radical discontinuity in our lives because the sinful nature is going to be put away once and for all. But the creation of God's design, the meaning and purpose of the seven-day creation, will unfold to its completion in God's sabbath day. The new age is not the end of this age but merely the end of sin and the end of an unfulfilled creation.

Sojourners and Homesteaders

With this general sabbatical framework in mind, we can look briefly at two important images or metaphors that are frequently used to describe the life of God's people in this world: the metaphors of "sojourners" or "pilgrims" and "householders" or "homesteaders." These metaphors are in fact related, I will suggest, because the Scriptures encourage us to

think of our sojourning not as sojourners but *as* homesteaders, and to think of our homesteading not as homesteaders but as sojourners. Let me explain.

If we have the quietistic idea that this is *not* our Father's world or that we do not really belong here, then the sojourning attitude will be one of looking forward to getting out of this world. We will walk through the world with no intention of participating too seriously in its political life, for example, except in so far as it is necessary to do some minimum amount of work to survive or to look after ourselves. We will walk through the world leaving all kinds of good creaturely things behind, including the full creaturely meaning of political life. We will always be looking forward to another world to live in because this one does not seem very much like home.

It seems to me, however, that the idea of sojourning ought to be one of always moving on toward the fulfillment of what we now have, of what we now are in God's creation. This idea is connected in the Scriptures with sojourning in the midst of sin or in the midst of persecution; it is sojourning in the midst of deformity. But sojourning is for those who know that they ought to break with sin and occupy the land, who sojourn as homesteaders who belong *here* and not elsewhere. It means to take politics seriously as an important dimension of our lives that must be developed, realizing that the final fulfillment of God's perfect kingdom of justice will gather into it all the glories of the earthly kingdoms and all the goodness of our labors for justice in this age. God did not intend that Israel should walk forever in the wilderness. Israel sojourned in the wilderness so that God could teach His people how to leave sin behind and to become responsible homesteaders. They were in the wilderness *not* so that they could adopt a permanent attitude of having no home, but so that they could learn what it would mean to live properly in the city of God when they finally got into the place where they would build their homes.

On the other hand, our homesteading in this world ought to be as sojourners. This age, even in its creaturely goodness, was not designed to remain forever. The sixth day is not the last day; God's sabbath rest is our final destination. If we think of ourselves simply as homesteaders, that is, as those who were put here on earth to remain permanently as caretakers, then we lose sight of our present disposability and our ultimate destiny. That is wrong. From the beginning we were meant to be the kind of stewards and homesteaders who are always anticipating and moving toward the final sabbath. From the beginning there has been an eschatological direction to the creation. From the beginning God has been calling us toward the fulfillment of the works of our hands. In this regard our homesteading in this world is a homesteading that looks ahead for more. We are homesteading as Abraham's sons and daughters, looking ahead to the heavenly city that God is building for us and through us in Christ Jesus. We are homesteading as sojourners.

We have to be both sojourners and homesteaders, but we have to be both at the same time. We must not be divided, thinking of ourselves at one time simply as sojourners in a world that is not really ours and at another time as homesteaders in a world that has no future to it. We are always on the move, looking forward to the creation's fulfillment, but we do so as people who are gathering up all the creation with us as we go; we are leaving nothing behind but are carrying everything with us into the kingdom. We were meant for this world and it was meant for us. There is only one creation. And yet all of God's good creation is intended for a final sabbatical fulfillment. It is important for us to return regularly to the biblical context of these metaphors because it seems to me that a primary assumption among Christians, historically, has been that this world and the next are more discontinuous than continuous. We have acted as if political life is somehow separated from or set over against, the coming kingdom of God. For example, the early church was influenced significantly by a movement called "gnosticism." The gnostics were convinced that this world is fundamentally a death-trap. We are locked into it at the moment but we do not belong here. A special knowledge (gnosis), however, has been given by revelation which shows some people how to escape from this world. The world of matter, the physical, visible world that we see and feel is an evil thing, a prison. The true world, the ultimate world of freedom and light, is the spiritual world—a higher realm. But there is no way of escape out of the visible world into the spiritual world without the special knowledge which is passed on in a secret fashion.

Gnosticism influenced Christianity to the point where some Christians began to think of Christ as the revealer of the special knowledge that shows how to escape from this world, the One who brings the special "gnosis" for the few and gives them the secret of escape into the realm of spiritual light. That influence led to a long tradition of quietism in Christian circles. This world is a rotten place, at least politically speaking. Politics is part of the evil world in which we now live. From this viewpoint Christ offers human beings a way out of this world into a heavenly kingdom. Christians are spiritual sojourners in a bodily, material prison.

Modern Ideologies

The same attitude in modern secular forms has had an important influence on what might be called the secularistic gnostic movements of our day, including Marxism. At first glance, Marxism of course seems to have nothing in common with Christian quietism. But in a Marxist vision of the world, the world is also fundamentally corrupt; it is fundamentally malstructured and disorganized. Capitalism is the highest stage of the social distortion and disorganization of human life in this world.

Human beings have to escape from it. But what is the special knowledge, the special light that can show the way out of the trap? A special revelation no longer comes from on high, and certainly no Messiah, other than Marx himself, comes to show us the way to escape. Rather, for the Marxist, the special knowledge is a refined science that allows us to know with final certainty the inner purpose and outcome of history. And by means of this special scientific knowledge we can look ahead to the final change of this world. But since Marx anticipated no escape from this world, his gnostic ideology turned into a secular activism, that is, a program for radically remaking the present world, including human nature. From the Marxist viewpoint, we live in an almost inhuman trap, a trap of social and economic darkness; but after the revolution we will have a world of perfect harmony and peace in which everyone will give according to his ability and take according to his need. It is a picture of an earthly paradise—a picture of heaven brought down to earth by human revolutionary means. It is not a heaven into which we escape because of the work of a gnostic Christ but a heaven that we ourselves make through the revolution. Thus, out of the influence of ancient gnosticism there arose first a “Christian” quietism about this world and then a secularized activism represented by such movements as modern Marxism.

But another reversal has also taken place in modern history. In the twentieth century we can see the transition from “Christian” quietism to a “Christian” activism. The social gospel movement, broadly speaking, was driven by a vision of the kingdom of God coming in this world. It would come, however, not by way of a climactic reappearing of Christ, but through the growth of democracy and economic equality in the world, achieved through human efforts. Once democracy had made its full progress through the world, once equality had been achieved in all respects, then the kingdom of God would exist. The social gospel gave a new impetus to people from a Christian tradition to work for the advancement of democracy and equality. As a consequence, “Christian” activism spread throughout much of Christendom—an activism that is not much different in appearance from secularistic activism.

In recent decades, moreover, yet another reversal has been taking place. I would call it the transition from secular activism to secular quietism. This attitude shows up in the writings of Robert Heilbroner, Jacques Ellul, and others, and it comes to expression in the pessimism of the average man and woman in the street. The deterministic forces of nature and technology, in this view, control the development of capitalism and socialism, the nuclear arms race, ecological destruction, and the computerized society so completely that human beings can no longer halt the developments set in motion centuries earlier by their predecessors. We are heading toward a dead end and there is no turning back. This world is a hopeless mess. There is no escape. Such an attitude leads, in practice, to political apathy and quietism—not a quietism that hopes for a new and better world created by God for those who escape

from this one, but just a quietistic pessimism about the present earthly existence which is all there is. Reforming efforts by human beings are useless. Political action, even revolution, cannot change the world or the direction in which it is heading. We are locked into this world and there is nothing we can do about it, so we might as well sit back and hope for the best.

All these forms of quietism and activism are in some sense deformities. They do not express a biblical attitude of expectancy. They are expressions of hopelessness, political hopelessness, because they must give up hope either about this world or the next. The Christian quietists—those who are Christians but influenced by a quietistic attitude toward this world—have hope for an escape from this world. They live by the hope that Christ is coming, that He will relieve them of this rotten world, and that He will lift His people out of it. But to have that hope they must give up hope about this world. The hope for escape goes hand in hand with the belief that earthly politics is a lost cause.

The secular activists, on the other hand, still have faith that the world can be transformed, but their hope for transforming this world goes hand in hand with relinquishing all hope about another world. For the Marxist, it is absolutely essential to give up "religion." The chief thing that holds human beings back from radically changing this world is their belief in another world. If people still hope that somehow God will come to relieve them of their earthly problems, then there is no possibility of getting them organized to change this world. As long as they hope for some outside intervention, as long as they believe that God will give them a better life in some other world, then, says the Marxist, it is not possible to be hopeful about the radical change of this world. It is necessary to give up hope for another world in order to become hopeful about this world.

Politics of Hope

If various forms of quietism and activism have such a strong influence on both Christian and non-Christian thought today, what can we do? Is there a biblical hope for politics? Is there a politics of hope that is biblical? Is there a politics of expectancy that grows out of the biblical vision of God's coming kingdom? I am confident that such a hope exists and is justifiable. It is dependent on the sabbatical structure of the creation in which Christ is revealed to us, not as one who provides an escape route from an evil world, but as the Lord of history. Politics is not a dirty part of this world that God has been unable to reconcile with His purposes for creation. At the same time, politics is not something that we have been given to do as human beings in order to try to create a final utopia in this age. Political power is not a tool by which we are supposed to redesign the world. Instead, political life is part of our human stewardship, under the sovereign Lord of history. Political life as an expression of our humanness is just as

important for us as family life, educational life, and agricultural life. None of these aspects of earthly life are permanent in the sense that they will exist in the same way forever and ever. But they all express what we are as God's image in community: they are dimensions of our sabbath-oriented earthly life.

The biblical revelation assures us that history *will* be fulfilled. This means, among other things, that justice will be accomplished. The prophets announced Christ's coming as the arrival of a righteous and just King. Christ is King! Kingship is a political designation, a political office. He comes as the One who is going to bring justice. The fact that the kingdom was at hand in His first appearance meant that the coming of His justice was at hand as well. As Christians, we can count on the fact that justice will finally be established. The One who makes things right and just has come; He has already begun the harvest of justice. His resurrection, which is the firstfruits of the *one* resurrection, is the firstfruits of the fulfillment of justice. The One who was raised was not just a slaughtered lamb; He was the King. Since the King has come among us, we are those who look forward to the completion of His kingdom of justice.

If the kingdom of justice is *Christ's* kingdom, then it is clearly not a kingdom that *we* design and construct. Our labors for justice will be gathered into it, incorporated into its final shape, but it is Christ who does the gathering and incorporating. He is King of the Kings of this world and is going to inaugurate the kingdom to complete all kingdoms. Christ is not the King of some other world. He is the King and Judge of this world. He told His disciples that "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). At that point He was saying, "This is my Father's footstool" (see Isaiah 66:1); He had put His feet on it. He had dwelt among us, and He was laying final claim to the earth. His final revelation of justice will bring this world to its fulfillment.

Hence we need not have a divided understanding of our life in this world—on the one hand as Christians with a hope of Christ's coming, and on the other, as citizens with earthly political responsibility. Instead, we should have an integral sense of *one life in one world under one King*. The Christian gospel is not a gnostic escape mechanism. We cannot escape politics, nor should we try to do so. Politics is part of what we are. But at the same time, even in politics, we are not locked up into a closed world of purely human deeds. Politics is not a world solely of human action. All that human beings do, even in deformity, is subject to the judgment and redemption of the King. He never lets us get away from Him. Therefore Christians can live in this world completely, without reservation, without holding anything back, without longing for a means of escape. But we can live in this world with quite a different attitude and approach than those who think that politics is merely a human affair. It is not merely human. This is God's Kingdom; this is God's world. Kings do not rule by human appointment alone; Presidents do not obtain their offices simply because they win electoral races. They hold their offices

under the providential judgment of the King. We can count on that. We can do our politics, and think politically, and act politically in that light, in obedience to the King, because we know that this is His kingdom.

Thus, we do not have to give up on politics; we can be hopeful and expectant because the King has come and true justice will be established. At the same time we must really *do* politics. One ought not to say, "I'm expectant, I'm expecting the King to come," and yet not be busy with part of the King's business. A pregnant woman cannot be expecting a baby without being busy with the preparations for her baby's arrival. If we truly expect the second coming of the Lord and the fulfillment of His kingdom, then everything in creation will be caught up in our preparation for the coming of the kingdom. We cannot say, "We have to be busy with evangelism, with Christian education, and with our church work because the King is coming," but at the same time say, "We can leave politics alone since the King does not care much about rotten earthly politics." That would be to act like a cook who doesn't care about a dirty kitchen or a librarian who doesn't care about the order of the books. No, the King is coming to bring His whole creation to fulfillment and to restore it to perfect righteousness. Therefore we must be busy as citizens with all that pertains to political life so that justice might shine through in our preparations.

Politics of the Kingdom

Now to summarize and organize the argument above, I would say that stewardly expectancy or expectant stewardship in politics should mean at least five things if we are paying attention to God's revelation.

First, we can expect with confidence the full harvest of justice in God's kingdom. The firstfruits of justice are in, and the harvest will soon be completed. The Lord has spoken, and His word is trustworthy. The full harvest, including the establishment of perfect justice throughout the earth, will be achieved. Anyone who does not live with that hope and expectancy has not understood the gospel. Any political action based on some other hope or on hopelessness is not Christian political action.

Second, we can do our politics as part of a true attitude of expectancy by asking what our responsibilities for justice are here and now. We need not speculate about the future or about the schedule of the end times. Our political responsibilities have nothing to do with being able to interpret all the details of the Book of Revelation correctly. Nor is the question for us: "How much of the world can we change radically in the near future?" or "What kind of human utopia do we want?" Those are the wrong questions. The correct question is "What is our responsibility for justice in the situation that is before us?" Every nation and society exists in a particular historical context with certain powers and capabilities, certain problems and prospects,

certain deformities and justices, both domestically and internationally. Most of us who are American citizens enjoy relatively great freedom and opportunity. What will we do with all of that? What should we be doing to see that greater justice for all is done now? We can ask these questions and exercise real responsibility because we know who the King is and what He is doing. We do not have to ask, "Can we do it?" The King is coming; justice will be established; that is all we need to know in order to get busy.

In the third place, we have the opportunity as expectant ones to point to the dead ends of political life in our present world. To do so will not be likely to guarantee our political popularity. Most politicians avoid this task like the plague. They cannot afford to let people think that there are any fundamental problems that cannot be solved by those in power. But Christians should not hesitate to expose the patterns of injustice that people and nations have established. Look closely at the way Americans are conducting themselves politically these days. Look critically at the public policies being implemented. Almost everyone knows that something is wrong. Look at the mess we are in environmentally, economically, and in the supply of energy, to mention only three. Surely we must not persist in the present course without delivering a word of warning and true hope. Precisely because we may know what true justice is, we can be fearless in exposing the dead ends of contemporary politics.

We can come with a critical word, moreover, because we can offer more than mere criticism. We are not prophets of doom, but prophets of life. The reason we can be realistic is because we believe in repentance from sin. We believe in a real judgment that will condemn injustice, and therefore we are remiss if we do not warn of the coming judgment. But we believe in the restoration of real righteousness, in true healing of broken lives, and in the setting right of every broken human relationship. That is the nature of our King and His kingdom. He is Judge *and* Redeemer. And, as we have said before, His kingdom is not just for another world but for this world. He will show us how to live justly here and now. We know that the truth about justice and peace is not a gnostic secret but a public revelation that God wants to give away freely to those who will acknowledge His kingship. It is not necessary for people to endure injustice if they will repent and heed the King.

In the fourth place, we can work concretely in the political arena for real change now. Our task is not simply to get clear in our minds what our responsibility *ought* to be. We can expect that obedience to God's norms will have consequences in our immediate political life. We do not need to have any assurance beforehand that our efforts will dazzle the world or turn out perfectly. Our job is not to *bring in* the kingdom but to respond as good stewards who by God's grace are *already in* the kingdom. The aim of our political responsibility is not to reorganize the world once and for all, but to minister to all our neighbors in a political way, demonstrating that God's justice

brings peace, well-being, happiness, and fulfillment. In the light of God's norms of justice and stewardship, in the light of the coming of His kingdom, we are confident that by looking at the dead ends in our society and by beginning to suggest changes that will lead to greater justice, we can go to work concretely and usefully here and now.

Since we are homesteading sojourners in this world, and since many of those who have political power do not acknowledge the true King, we might only lose our heads in real political action. But that is no problem. Such results would only strengthen the whole body of Christ worldwide. The blood of martyrs has never been a hindrance to the coming of the kingdom. We should have no fear. On the other hand, we must not be surprised or disappointed if God arranges positions of great influence for some of us as He did for Joseph and Daniel. With or without great political power, our aim must be to do justice in this age as part of our expectant labor for the coming of the kingdom. It does not matter whether we lose our heads or not. We are the only ones on earth free enough to be able to rejoice if we lose them and to rejoice if we keep them. But our real rejoicing can come forth from the fruits of justice. We must weep if justice is not done. Thus it is worse for us to hold political power and not do justice than for us to lose our heads trying to do justice.

Fifth and last, we can work with true expectancy in politics as those who know that our works will follow us. This is something not emphasized enough in our circles. Moses prays in Psalm 90: "Lord, establish the work of our hands." In the apostle John's vision of the final revelation of Jesus Christ, God's blessing comes to those who die in the Lord, as the Spirit says, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" (Rev. 14:13). Here is the sabbatical fulfillment of God's one creational purpose. What we do in the Lord, by the power of His Spirit, in politics and in every other earthly occupation will be brought to perfection in the final sabbath. We can be confident that our deeds of justice now are kingdom deeds that will never be lost. Christ is gathering them up into His great storehouse of treasures. They are gold that will not be destroyed by the fire because they are fruits of God's redeeming work in us.

Of all those who live on earth, we are most fortunate and have the most for which to be thankful. God has given us all things in the creation to enjoy and to nurture. We belong here. We were made for the earth and it for us. We have been called to be homesteaders and political creatures as the revealers of God in this age. And at the same time God is calling us to the greatest day of celebration that we can imagine—to God's own sabbath rest when all of His glory will be unveiled. That day is not of our making, but it is not another world. It will be the completion, the culmination of all our work on the earth. We are sojourners on the move toward the final revelation of justice and peace. The totality of our earthly lives and service can and should be caught up in the expectancy of the coming kingdom. Christ the King is leading us toward

fulfillment by directing our present steps carefully through the present age of earthly stewardship in all of life. Contemporary politics is an expectant calling in Christ for those who are His.