

Law Sub-Track: How Do We Know What is Good for Society?

The good news of Christ gives eternal life and changes hearts. Meanwhile God has also given civil government to protect orderly life in this world: it is to ‘encourage those who do good, and to punish those who do evil.’ As Christians who love our neighbours we want to assist the work of government. But how can anyone know what is ‘good’ for society, without first knowing what is ‘true’ about society? Against the backdrop of post-modern scepticism, political fashions, and competing power claims, this session will re-affirm the importance of truth in the public square, and then examine how the whole Bible, including God’s law in the Old Testament, should be the foundation of our analysis of the public good in the modern state.

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I. Introduction

A. Toward a biblical framework for the public square

1. Complex question: interrelationship between temporal and eternal welfare

2. Simple starting points:

i. God’s love:

(a) humans created *good* as embodied persons

(b) provides for our eternal good and also our civil good in the meantime

ii. God’s sovereignty:

(a) God has ordained both civil sphere and the *good* news of the gospel

(b) these two are good, coherent, not intrinsically opposed

(c) civil authority is God-derived and therefore God-limited

B. Public authority (Rom 13:1,4)

1. Why? Love: given for our *good* (Rom. 13:1,4)

2. How? Promoting *good*, restraining evil (Rom. 13:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:14)

3. Key point: our dominant categories are *love* and *goodness*

i. Love seeks others' good

ii. Goodness has a moral structure: the moral order of creation

iii. Therefore love is moral but not *moralistic*

a. Moralism seeks morality for the sake of human pride

- b. Love observes morality for the *good* of others

- c. There is more to the good of others than immediate outward morality

C. Method this week

1. Truth: How do we *know* what is good for society?

2. Goodness: So what *is* good for society?

3. Love: How do we *promote* what is good for society?

4. Skill: How do we make our *arguments* in court?

II. Public Truth Reintroduced: Creation

Unavoidably, loving rule for society depends on what is true about society.

A. Truth is good news

1. Public truth is unfashionable

2. Public truth is necessary

3. Public truth is revealed in the gospel (John 1:1-14, 14:6)

B. Truth derives from creation – it is:

1. Objective – law can apply universally

2. Rational – law can apply rationality in law making

3. Communicable – law can apply through discourse not violence

C. Truth corresponds with creation

1. Natural law has ontological basis in objective order and general revelation

2. Natural law has epistemological weakness:

- i. The *world* we look at is not perfect but fallen (Gen. 3)

- ii. *We* who look at the world are fallen (Rom. 1:21, 22)

- iii. *We* who look at the world are also finite

III. Public Truth Revealed: The Bible

A. The Bible as good news for the public square

B. The Old Testament

- 1. Revelation of the public good begins in the Old Testament

- 2. The challenge of Old Testament law

- 3. Christ unlocks Old Testament law (2 Cor. 3:14-18)
 - i. Tricky subject but right methodology is application based.

 - ii. Christ reconciles us to the clarity of the OT law

- a. The law condemns us, but God justifies us in Christ

- b. The law shows us the way, but Christ's Spirit empowers us in it

iii. Christ resolves the complexity of the OT law

a. Christ's life – moral applications

(1) Law: requirements of God's nature on human nature: e.g. love God and neighbour, both individually and socially.

(2) Christ: teaching and example affirms and clarifies this.

(3) Hence: OT morality still the structure of a flourishing life

b. Christ's death – sacrificial applications

(1) Law: access to God despite God's justice over human life: e.g. sacrifices, priesthood, temple.

(2) Christ: sacrificial death fulfils the requirements of justice, and gives us access to God once for all.

(3) Hence: OT sacrifice applies once for all in Christ's death.

c. Christ's resurrection – national separation applications

(1) Law: kept Israel a separate civil entity foreshadowing a new human race; e.g. food laws, circumcision, administration, other 'separation' and non-mixing laws, such as cloths.

(2) Christ: resurrection is the actual beginning of the true new humanity – everyone joined to him by the Holy Spirit is in the kingdom of God, while in kingdoms of the world.

(3) Hence:

a. *Separation applications*: God's people are no longer constituted by the flesh (i.e. ethnically or nationally) but by joining to the risen Christ 'by the Spirit': OT separation principles apply as metaphors for Christian (individual and ecclesiastical) moral distinctiveness within this world.

b. *National applications*: Israel was unique as a theocracy, as Jesus was unique as God-Man; but just as this divinity made for exemplary humanity, so the theocracy provides a *good* universal paradigm for wisely ordered national life (interpreted carefully in historical context).

4. Pulling it together: OT law is still a God-given paradigm of creation *goodness* for social humanity, with a moral structuring, showing us how to flourish.

C. Misunderstandings about the Bible as public truth

1. “We should use sociological studies not the Bible.”
2. “The Bible is not a political textbook, but a book about relating to God.”
3. “Wars of religion show the Bible is politically unusable.”
4. “People won’t listen to us if we use the Bible.”
5. “Not all societies have the Bible, and not everyone is Christian.”

Conclusion

Resources:

Burnside, Jonathan, *God, Justice, and Society* (2011)

Chester, Tim, *Good News to the Poor: sharing the gospel through social involvement* (2004)

Chaplin, Jonathan, *Talking God: the legitimacy of religious public reasoning* (2008)

Grudem, Wayne, *Politics According to the Bible* (2010)

Gundry, Stanley (ed.), *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (1996)

Frame, John, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987)

Keller, Timothy, *Generous Justice* (2010) and *The Reason for God* (2010)

Schluter, Michael, and Ashcroft, John, (eds.) *Jubilee Manifesto: A framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform* (2005)

O'Donovan, Oliver, *Resurrection and Moral Order: an outline for evangelical ethics* (1986), and *The Desire of the Nations: rediscovering the roots of political theology* (1996).

Ovey, Michael, *Does Athens need Jerusalem? A Christian context for secular thought*, (Cambridge Papers, Jubilee Centre, March 2000) and *Beyond scrutiny? Minorities, majorities and post-modern tyranny* (Cambridge Papers, Jubilee Centre, June 2004).

Poythress, Vern, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (1995)

Wright, Christopher, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (2004), *The Mission of God* (2006).