

# OpenTheo

## **Conversations in a Crisis: Part III: Reforming Our Political Imaginaries (with Rev Benjamin Miller)**

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### **Alastair Roberts**

Faced with our challenge of remaining faithful within and addressing our various contemporary societal crises with wisdom, Christians and churches are fracturing over our differing approaches and postures. My friend Ben Miller suggested that we have a series of conversations, to help us to pursue greater clarity on the principles, virtues, duties, and practices that can equip Christians to meet such difficult times with prudence, insight, and courage.

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### **Transcript**

The following is one of a series of conversations that I'm having with my friend, the Reverend Ben Miller. Ben is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on Long Island, and he suggested in the context of current divisions within the church over political and other issues that we have a wide-ranging series of conversations about issues of Christian ethical reflection, epistemology, charity, obedience, trust, community, and conscience in this context. While our conversations are occasioned by issues such as COVID, on which Ben and I have different opinions, our conversations will not be narrowly about it, but will be a broader exploration of issues of Christian faithfulness in any sort of crisis, some of the principles that should guide us, and some of the practices and virtues that we need to pursue.

Through our conversations, we're hoping to arrive at more accurate and charitable understandings of each other, a better grasp of responsible processes of Christian

reasoning and deliberation, and a clearer apprehension of principles that we hold in common. We invite you to join us for these conversations, to listen to our discussions, and then to share your own thoughts in the comments and elsewhere. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

So I thought we'd recommence our conversation with a discussion of how we are to think about civil government. We've already talked a bit about deliberation, about distinguishing between the good and the right, and about the ways that we should think about our deliberation in a more careful manner. And I thought it would be helpful to get into this particular issue, as it has been such a cause of difference between Christians and division.

So what are some of the ways in which we can give a shape to what civil government means for Christians? And I think that does tie back immediately into our initial conversation about the good and the right. I mean, I think we have to reflect first on civil government as a good. It's so easy to jump to questions of what's right for a government to do or what's right in response to a government, questions of policy and citizen response to policies, let's say.

But is government a good? And how do we think about that good? I was reflecting on this question in preparation for this and just thought maybe there's been so much written about this, it's tempting to start interacting with all of that immediately. But I think maybe we could just think about government. Its purpose is to secure a common life.

That's simplistic, but government assumes that there is not merely a collection of individuals who have no real organic or inherent relationship to each other. It assumes that there is a body of people, that there is a grouping of people such that they have a group identity, they have a collective identity and a collective life, a common life that needs to be preserved and promoted and secured. And I guess this matters quite a lot to me in my American context, because I actually had someone say to me, and they were serious ones, the purpose of government is to secure my individual rights.

And as I thought about that, I thought, well, you could make the case that that's actually exactly what government is not supposed to do, because if it's purely securing your individual rights, then the question of how those rights interrelate with other people's rights and how your well-being relates with other people's well-being is almost not even on the table for discussion. And so maybe we just would need to begin with some reflections on what is common life. Yes, I think that's a helpful place to begin.

We can talk, for instance, about the language of common goods, which people often use. And beyond that, we can think about order, a common order to share. You could think also about common agency.

There are ways in which we need to act as a collective in certain situations, and the

government can serve as a coordinating and directing agency for those sorts of activities. Think, for instance, of many of the collective decisions that we have to make that can't be addressed merely on individual level. But if we want to have an effective energy policy or if we want to have healthy foreign relations, we need some sort of collective agency represented by a particular party or series of parties.

And that, I think, is something that government provides for. In fact, I think it's Oliver O'Donovan and I'm sure others have pointed out that that is a way in which government can secure freedom. We don't have the freedom to act together if we are all purely individuals.

There is a freedom of agency, as you're pointing out, that comes through being ruled, being represented, being guided. And having someone, as you said, who can act in our for us, but in our place. So we're not we're not going out and creating a water source, all of us out creating a common water source.

We have we have an agent who does that on our behalf, that sort of thing. So that's become more and more helpful for me, although I do think, again, I speak in my North American context here. I do think that idea of common goods and common agency and a common life is for us, at least in North America, it's historically that's a bit of a challenge for us to think in those terms.

It's very, very easy to begin with what affects me and what's good for me and what I want to do and whether I'm being constrained. And I do think our imagination here needs some work in that area. I've tried to think about maybe illustrations even.

So. I've told my children many times, family life, for example, thinking of family life as a common life. It's not so much like eating a pizza, it's more like a swimming pool party.

So when you're eating a pizza, if you have a piece of pizza, that means I don't have that piece of pizza. Right. So we can be enjoying the pizza together.

But the reality is if you have that pizza, I don't have that pizza. And so that's that's not how family life actually is. It's more like a swimming pool party where the more people who are enjoying that party together, the more people in the pool, the more fun the party is.

It's kind of a silly illustration, but it's just a way of kind of getting us as a family to think about the fact that when the more participation and the more we are all contributing, the more we are all flourishing and just trying to help get that that imaginative space framed out, if that if that makes sense. I think also you talked about your particular North American perspective. It's important to consider that the common good order, common identity, all these sorts of things are very contingent.

It depends upon your particular culture and context, what those things actually entail

and mean. So what it means to have a common identity within, say, the UK or within 10th century B.C. Israel is very different from what it might look like in North America today. And so what the government is actually charged with doing may in some context be leaning more towards maintaining the conditions whereby individuals can pursue their own ends, as opposed to a situation where there's very much a commonality of goods and a very settled community in which one's interests as an individual are very much bound up with the interests of the group in a very intense way.

I've been reading Nathan Hatch's book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, and it's interesting to think about how different views of government were different, how different the understandings of the goods secured by civil government were in a time, let's say, of enormous population explosion and rapid westward expansion here in the United States. So you think about after the our unfortunate war against your king and and this enormous population explosion going west and things were just so decentralized. And so in that context, the Jeffersonian Republican rhetoric made a certain sense because people were very much more isolated.

You know, you're out on the frontier. There are not cities. There certainly was nothing like the established traditions and history of, let's say, Europe.

And so the view of government that emerged from that time was a la Jefferson, very, very individualistic, though that model would not work at all, would not have worked at all at that time in Europe. And and I'm not convinced that works very well today in the United States because we're a very different country now. Our social organizations are so different.

Our social forms are so different now. And so. Then when we transition from.

Thinking about this general good of a common life to then what's right, what what government policies ought to be. It is so contextual and it doesn't mean that we can't speak of certain fundamental ethical norms that should guide government policy that are pretty much transferable, but so much of what makes a people flourish depends on their time, place, the situation, specifics, you know. And that is not just a case between countries, even within the US, you have so many different sorts of community and context, and this can often, I think, be what provokes many of the big political oppositions when people recognize that policies that might work in a particular context of directly antagonistic to the forms of life that are integral to their own communities.

And so that sense of an existential tension between different groups within the country that each have a vision for their own common goods that can be at odds with the goods of securing the goods of other parties. Yeah, that is I certainly see that here in the States, and I don't know how many big ideas we want to throw in the blender right out of the gate here, but I think that is why, let's say, in Catholic social theory, something like so-called subsidiarity has been so important that the lower levels of government that are

more localized may have a better sense of what's going on on the ground. I think that was the idea with the American Federalist constitutional system was not everything works well at a big national level simply because the life of people here in New York and the life of people in Oregon and in South Dakota and in New Mexico are very different culturally, historically, and so on.

So, yeah, I think that's one of the that is perhaps somewhat of a unique problem here in the States is we are a strange conglomerate of cultures here. But that is. I think you can see it.

You would know more about this than I, but I think you can see that even in Europe, between countries where you maybe have like the European Union, when you start to gather different even nationalities under a kind of social organizational umbrella. There are things that that can enable that are very good and there are things that that can kind of blur over that becomes a problem. Even within the UK, of course, you have different countries where you've got Northern Ireland and its interests are very much connected with the Republic of Ireland.

You have Scotland and its relationship to the European Union that would be different from that of England. And all these sorts of questions need to be dealt with within that common foreign policy or common questions of how do we relate to Europe? How do we also relate to each other in that relationship? And so those sorts of questions will always deal with some degree of variation and difference within the group being represented. But some countries, I think the US being chief example here, have a lot more variety within them.

One of the questions that I think we do need to explore here are. Some of the more specific goods that we have in mind, we use that expression common goods how can we actually maybe give a bit more shape to what we're thinking about here? That's a great question. I wonder if I hope this is not too abstract, but I wonder if it's worth thinking about what exactly is a common good.

As opposed to a shared experience of individual goods. So. If I'm sitting with if we're sitting together on a beach watching a sunset, we are sharing that good.

But we could also do that individually. I could enjoy the sunset alone. You know, it's enhanced by your company, but the good itself is something I have access to individually.

If you and I go to a grocery market and we both pick a jar of pickles off the shelf, the fact that supermarket is there, you know, there's a good and we are both able to access it. And so we are jointly enjoying it. But at the end of the day, that's my jar of pickles and that's your jar of pickles.

And it's sort of an individual good that we are enjoying jointly. Whereas if you think about something like a basketball team winning a or a football team, I'll use something closer to the European scene, a football team winning a championship. It is obvious that no player on that team does that individually.

That good stands or falls with the group and with even the person who's sitting on the bench and doesn't even play is still enjoying that good only because all are there and all have participated and so on. I wrestle with finding good illustrations of this, but I do think I do think it's important to to think about our now civil or political life together, maybe in more more in those terms that it's more like a body when one member suffers, all suffer. Do we really think that way? Or is it just that here again, I'm speaking in the States, is it just that government represents a package, hopefully of benefits for which people are sort of.

In many ways, competing or at least that's the perception is this government protecting your rights or my rights, is it providing goods for you or goods for me? Or even is it able to provide goods for both of us, but those are not goods we share in common. I think it's very difficult sometimes for us here in the States to have a sense that our life, my life with my neighbors stands or falls together. And again, I don't know if that's too abstract, but I do think.

That underlayment, we have to think about that before maybe we can really understand the specific goods that government does need to secure and why those matters, why they should why those should matter to all of us. And that gets back to some of the things we've said about terms like freedom in the past, that those terms really need to be unpacked. There's a lot within them that will be contingent to a particular situation that cannot be comprehended merely in terms of individual autonomy.

So you mentioned already the idea of common action as giving us a sort of freedom that we would not have were there not some sort of direct agency. The freedom, for instance, of an orchestra when it has a conductor, the conductor actually gives it a coordination that enables it to do something remarkable that no individual by themselves could perform or even set of individuals could perform without some external order imposed upon them. And so that is a sort of freedom that we tend to think about.

We don't tend to think about that sort of freedom. We tend to think about freedom as individual autonomy. That's the paradigm case.

But for many groups, and certainly historically, that has been freedom has been seen more in terms of the freedom of that collective agency. And so that feeling when people have liberty as a country from some external power that is imposing its order upon them is not just the feeling of now we can all do what's right in our own eyes as individuals. It's the fact we now have a common assertion of our direction as a people.

And that is a sort of freedom that exceeds the merely individual. And so I think even within somewhere like the US where there's that strong emphasis upon individual liberty, there is nonetheless a sense of the freedom of belonging to a people that has its own direction and agent collective agency within the world of which you can understand yourself as a part. I think beyond that, there's also there are common orders within which we all have a stake.

So it's like playing a game. We all have a stake in the rules. The rules need to be, first of all, they need to be established rules.

There need to be referees and other officials, umpires, linesmen, whatever, to officiate and to ensure that those rules are fairly and equitably applied. And then we also need some way of, um, we all need to submit to those rules, have a sense that if we go against the rules, if we high handedly try and cheat, then something is lost from our common life. And there's a sense that we all have to buy into this order.

In order for us all to benefit from predictable and even handed society, when rules are applied in capricious or in, in arbitrary ways, in ways that are inequitable, or when people are clearly cheating the system, we all feel less free. We feel exposed to some order that is, um, something that is detrimental to the common good. So that's another aspect of it.

I mean, we can name many others. Absolutely. I was just thinking to your first point there about a sense of common identity and, and common, uh, a common life that's been threatened.

I remember when 9-11 happened, there was this interesting sentiment that went around New York of don't mess with New York. I don't think you could find a place in the world where people are more individualistic than New York, but somehow that particular event really touched a sense of we are New Yorkers, you know, and it was interesting to hear that kind of rhetoric in public. Um, how much there was a sense of you've touched our place, you've touched our people, and that's not how you ordinarily hear.

That's not the rhetoric usually here in New York at all. Uh, and then to your, to your other, uh, illustration of order and rules, you know, something like a soccer match. It's interesting as I was just thinking as you were speaking, it's easy to see how a team's success or failure is, is obviously a group experience as a common, that's a common thing, but it is very illuminating to think about how on a football pitch.

You have teams who now have competing interests. And in that context, the rules and the referee, the structure of the game, the order of the game becomes all the more important so that both teams with their competitive interests can enjoy the good of the game. And so the, you know, the fans and, and their whole story comes with each fan club and so on.

All of that, all of that only can exist in a way that is good. If there is a pretty rigid structure where if you tackle someone the wrong way, you're going to get a yellow card, you know? And it's, I think that sometimes when there is this, at least the strong potential for competition within members of a body, it's tempting then to see government as even more of a threat because it might side with my competitor rather than realizing that in that context, we probably need even stronger government precisely because there's that potential for competition. Is that, is that worth exploring a bit? Although I realize that might be getting into some questions we want to visit down the line as well.

I think those are important questions to at the very least register at this point. And it also, I think, highlights some of the reasons why people feel injustice around some of these questions at this current time. So first of all, are the rules being applied equitably? That's been a big issue within the UK, for instance, the fact that the prime minister and other leading figures in government were having parties at the time of lockdown.

Now, this is a sense we're not all playing by the same rules. There is an inequitable enforcement of these requirements. And so even while people are not, they're not opposed to the rules, they like the fact that we're playing according to the same principles.

But when they see people cheating as they see it, there is a sense this isn't actually a common good. This is one party taking advantage of another. Or there's a sense we're not all in this together, actually, after all.

There are certain parties that can opt out. Or when people feel there's a very arbitrary application of these enforcement of these principles, the rules can be suspended when there are certain issues that arise like the Black Lives Matter protests that will not be suspended on other occasions. And so those things really, they give people a sense of freedom and common good being violated that should not be neglected.

That is, there's something very real that's being registered there. And there's an injustice that can actually change what was formerly seen as a common good to the imposition of maybe even a tyrannical authority. And the other thing that I think we get into here is recognition that there are different imaginative ways of thinking about government.

And it's not necessarily the case that one of these is right and the others are wrong, that they may have different contexts. They talk about subsidiarity, and it's not always the case that that means delegating down. It's finding the right level, because sometimes that means delegating up to some greater agency that is better able to make certain decisions.

And in the case of something like a situation where you've got a football game, there are different ways to conceive freedom and agency. You can think in terms of the freedom,



as we've discussed, of having reliable rules that are well enforced and equitably applied. That people are playing, as it were, on a level playing field.

And there's not a... there are also sorts of games that the rules are, in principle, equitably applied, but the game itself is rigged. Or it certainly feels that way, that even if you're playing by the rules, the rules will always lead to a certain sort of outcome. I mean, the game of monopoly was originally designed to show something of the injustice of a capitalist system where things get concentrated within a particular party's possession.

And at a certain point, you realize there's one or two members of the family that just want to turn the board over and the others want to keep on playing and they want to really press on their advantage. Whereas a lot of modern games, I think European games particularly, have had, OK, we need to get past this monopoly problem. We need to actually develop games that are fun to play to the end, even for parties who might be losing.

And yet at the same time, retain some sense of skill and advantage and not just all leave it up to chance and luck. So you have that on the one side. You also have the sense of the common good of being part of a team.

And I think this is another thing that gets at some of the differences between different groups' response to COVID regulations in particular, where you have some people conceiving of the national group as a sort of team and the government as a coach. Whereas for others, it's the government is a referee and the referee really should stay back. The referee that's really hyperactive, wanting to manage everything is not a good referee.

It just becomes an obstruction to the game. Whereas on the other hand, the coach is someone who maintains the collective agency of the team and you submit to the coach. You may argue with the coach at certain points, but you honour the coach and you just go along with what he tells you to do so that you're acting as a team, because that good of acting as a team is greater than everyone getting to do what they want to do or even recognising there may be a flaw in your coach's strategy.

But you need to deal with that in a way that does not overthrow the order of the team. That is a very illuminating distinction between the coach and the referee. And I think from my observation here in the States, I don't know if I have ever met a North American in my context who thinks of our, let's say, national government as a coach.

Definitely the referee model at best. It's interesting to think about the different kinds of relationships that are going on there, though. And this might be something where different contexts, we could think about how this plays out differently.

There is a kind of remoteness of national government from local life in the States just because we're such a huge country. And there's also with a coach an ongoing relationship in which there is some reciprocity, not that the players are ever in charge, but they at least can give the coach feedback as they practice. It is a living, active relationship, whereas you only see the ref during the game.

He shows up when there's a situation that really demands it. And so I just I wonder, I actually wonder this quite a lot. Is it possible to is it even possible and this might be context by context to have a relationship with civil authorities that is more like that of a coach? And I gather it must be because you've helped me see outside of my little American bubble here that there are countries where there is more of a sense that those who are ruling politically are.

A bit more almost there's almost a fatherly or motherly sense, which is more like the coach sort of a sense of ongoing life together with these authorities where they are, they are in touch with us, even as they are acting for us. That surely is not something I a flavor I get much, much here. You can maybe think of American government has seen maybe for those who are familiar with soccer, more like FIFA, a very corrupt ruling body that gets in the way of the actual health of the sport.

We'd be better without it, as it were. But yes, I think certainly it's not the case that our country's government has seen in the UK, has seen straightforwardly as a coach by any means. But there are elements of that within it.

For instance, the queen is a non-political figure in the way that not politically partisan, but clearly represents the country. And there's a sense in which she exhorts the country. She has a sort of role as a grandmother that you feel we all we look up to her.

We take her cues from different things. We have a sense of being invested in the good that she represents. And at the heart of the country, there's not different political parties and prime minister that's really representing the partisan interests of a particular group within the country, but a commonly held grandmother, as it were, and family that arises from her.

And that, I think, gives a different imaginative framework for thinking about government and recognizing, OK, we really do not think that the government is competent. We don't think it's particularly we can see corruption and all these other sorts of problems within it. But we recognize that that is taking place within something of a commonality.

And this is just like having to deal with a very bad coach for a team that we're really invested in. But that's what you just said there, I think, puts a finger on how different that that model is from the American one, because the language you use was at the heart of the government here is not partisanship. Whereas I think we would have to say here in the States, it absolutely is.

This is how you can get people saying things like not my president. Because he or she is a president from the other party. And that just is sort of inherent in things here where you so if backing up a bit in our conversation, if one of the fundamental problems of civic political life is that there will often be a majority interest and a minority interest, that there will be one good.

That maybe most people are are invested in and then there are lesser goods that this dissidents say are invested in, how do you adjudicate that relationship? Is it just as simple as government obviously represents the majority and we just crush dissent or crush the dissident or crush the minority? Well, when you take that problem and translate that into a fundamentally partisan. Form of government, I mean, I'm mindful of early reflections on the American political project that the party spirit could destroy it, and I don't think it's probably too strong to say we're kind of there here in the States. Because now you have a situation where it's no longer there are there really are no longer goods.

We don't think in terms of goods that we all share. We think in terms of the goods represented by this party. And if they happen to grab power, then what does that mean for all of the rest of us? It feels as if we've been kicked out of the game and they're holding the trophy without even a contest almost, you know.

So. I just think, again, we're speaking here of sort of the political imagination, not so much what actually is as how we think and imagine about it and the reflexive kind of responses that come from imagining it a certain way. And there is no Queen Mother picture, Queen Mother in the picture here in the States.

And I do think that creates a problem. And and that's not necessarily to say that you could actually have such a figure. There's a sense in which we're dealing with very, very different sorts of situations.

And the political imaginary that arises from those will be constrained by historical and other contextual factors that mean that I mean, I'm very much in favor of monarchy in the UK at the moment, but it's not something that I think would work in the US, nor is it something that I think is going to work in the long term in the UK. I think there are ways in which our nation is changing that will eventually make the monarchy most likely fail. And that is a cause of sorrow to me.

But I just think that these things are historical entities. The nation is something that will necessarily change in its imaginary over time. And our question is how to negotiate that well.

So it does not lead to a breakdown of society, but actually leads to its healthy continuance in some different form that does not just break off with the past. And that, I think, again, requires something different from saying there's a model that we must

apply to everyone. Everyone must think about government in this particular way.

This is every nation must have a monarch and then approach things that way. That's not simply not the case. Rather, we need to recognize goods, not just in a sort of reflective way where we think about these things in the abstract, belonging or a sense of history and tradition.

All these sorts of things are important, but we need to work beyond the abstract and think about what shape do those things take within the specific context within which we find ourselves? And how can we maintain the forms that they take, recognize where there are deficiencies relative to the goods that should be present within the society, and then work to address those deficiencies and move towards a fuller realization of the good within our specific context. That is a lot of hard work, of course, partly because of imaginative models. I entirely agree with you that all forms of government, let us say, are historically conditioned and that we shouldn't exalt any of them to be the ideal to which everything should conform.

But some of them do carry within them imaginative possibilities that open up possibilities for thinking and acting together, whereas others, just at that sort of visceral imaginative level, they kind of foreclose those things. I'm sounding maybe a little bit too pessimistic, but I really struggle with how to work out the project you just outlined here in the States because our public imagination here is just so suffused with partisanship. And I could give some specifics about how that plays out before we ever get to a policy conversation.

Or even before we get to a conversation about goods, there's already this sense that there's not a unified good. There might be a pile of resources that we all want access to, but it's very difficult to... So I agree with you. I wouldn't want to ever say that form of government is ideal or certainly mandated morally.

But the question, I think, is how is Christians living in a society, let's say, where there's you have almost nothing in your public imaginative sphere that fosters a sense of commonness? And in fact, in many ways, promotes suspicion of any notion of commonness. As if, for example, that is a sliding slope down to collectivism or... I've heard people say some shocking things about the common good that they just feel like that is a cloak for people trying to take away your freedoms. But this is at an imaginative level, a real problem.

We probably also need to deal with that as a problem. There is a way in which certain conceptions of a common good can become really detrimental to freedom. If we're all shackled together and there's no sense of capacity and hospitality and mercy within our concept of the common good for dissenters and those who might have a different conception or want to find some place within the society on different terms, it can actually become something that is very damaging.

And so just within the history of the US, many people came to the US precisely to escape that sort of common good, so-called common good, a common good that was overly determined within particular societies in a way that was inhospitable to those who were religious and other dissenters. And so the question there needs to be pressed in different directions. It's not just one that applies to one side of the political equation.

I think the other thing that maybe we move our conversation in, which you've already raised, is how can we do this as Christians? Because as Christians, we have different narrative and imaginative possibilities for thinking about government and our relationship to it than those who do not have the Christian faith. And so what are some of the specific resources that in our thinking about government give us some greater capacity in our repertoire of response to it? Right. That's where, as a pastor, as you can imagine, I spend a lot of time just meditating and trying to think about how can I, using scripture faithfully, being mindful of what we talked about last time, which is I want to be really careful when I say thus, say of the Lord, as opposed to situations where I'm just reflecting maybe from some biblical principles and thinking about wisdom questions.

But how can we open the scriptures and reform and nourish and renew our imaginations about the life in the body politic where God has placed us? So some obvious things come to mind. One is simply that God is Lord of the historical contingencies, that in every situation, in every political situation, from the most horrific, horrific, totalitarian to the most chaotically anarchic, from living in the aftermath of the French Revolution to living in North Korea, in all of these situations, God is king. And what that means is that there are opportunities here for me to love people in his name and expect that his spirit is working here through his church, through the word preached and lived, to ultimately establish the kingdom of Christ.

I definitely hold to the view, and this matters for me politically, that Jesus, when he ascended and sat down at the Father's right hand, began to reign and rule over all things in heaven and earth, that he is the exalted messianic king now and that he will rule and put his enemies under his feet. And so there's just that going on spiritually wherever we are. And what I think that does is it allows us immediately to stop fixating on the political specifics, though they are important, and begin to recover a sense of agency and hope within Christ's rule.

So even if I am greatly constrained in my public agency by, let's say, a particular political situation, I still have agency under Christ. I can still be a neighbor in his name. And his rule is worked out in and through my good works, right, as his spirit is working.

And that's hopeful, too, because it means that this particular, let's say, regime, to use the popular term that I'm living under, or this incredibly anarchic situation where it's chaotic, this will rise and fall. This is not just contingent, but very temporary. It is not the kingdom.

It's just a little kingdom over which Christ rules. And so I don't know. I think that deflation of the intensity of fixation on this political situation and just the kind of overwhelming urgencies that can accompany that, I think that is actually just even psychologically quite helpful.

It just enables us to step back from things. I think what you're getting at there in the penultimacy of human authority is such relief from the fear of government, the recognition that there is a greater government over all our earthly governments, and that, as Christ said to Pilate, that he would have no authority had it not been given to him. And ultimately, the source of all authority is God himself.

And there is a providential subordination of all earthly governments to the rule of Christ. And that, I think, gives us a sense, first of all, of recourse, that when we feel injustice, we can take all the human courses of recourse that are given to us in the Constitution and other forms of checks and balances, et cetera, within our country, lesser magistrates, whatever, courts of higher appeal. We can also go to God himself in prayer.

And that is our primary course. Recourse gives us, I think, relief from the extreme anxiety and tension that often would accompany a sense that everything is at stake in Washington or Westminster. There is something, there's a higher throne, a far higher throne, and we can approach that also with that, the sense of, and this is something that really comes out in earlier Christian rights, particularly within the Reformation, the sense of providential overrule of government, that even in the case where there's tyranny, you can see God's hand in that, in God's hand in judgment upon a people, whatever it is.

And so the response to tyranny can often be repentance. Not so much, we must repent of the sins of our government, but we must repent of our sins that led to this sort of situation. And not just in a way that is sort of finding some way to spin the sins of government as if they were our sins, but to recognize that in our own failures, those things that chiefly fall to our feet to do, we have failed.

And as a result, we have this situation. And that, I think, is something that certainly you see it in the Reformation. I think you also see it to some extent in scripture.

So the idea that David can deal with King Saul and all his oppression in the way that he does is in part because you have alongside that the sort of imprecatory Psalms that he can bring the full weight of that situation before the Lord, which actually leaves him in the court of human activity, able to almost step back from a conflict that otherwise he would be propelled into. And along with that, a sense that in due time, the Lord is going to remove this man and the Lord is going to establish his justice. And there's a confidence that enables him to lower the stakes a bit.

Yeah. And along with those just powerful points that God will even do good through evil rulers. It isn't merely that there's evil going on and there's a higher throne above it, and

therefore we can pray and that just kind of calms our hearts in responding to evils and looking at our own hearts as God exposes our sins through chastening of wicked rulers.

But it's also the just surprising fact that God is sometimes doing much more good than we realize, even through great evils that are happening politically. I mean, we preached on Jonah a while back and you put me on to Rabbi David Foreman's work on that. And I think he was the one who pointed out how Assyria in that time was a major political threat, a very evil nation that had caused a lot of trouble for Israel.

And yet, in some respects for quite a long time, Assyria stood between Israel and Babylon, another rising power that was going to do a lot more damage. And you might sweep away Assyria, but then that opens the waves to come in from Babylon. You think about the apostle Paul, would his ministry have been possible without the infrastructure of Rome? And I just think that is comforting to reflect that what even perhaps very wicked rulers intend for evil, God will use for good.

And sometimes civil order that has immense injustices in it that do need to be challenged and should cause us to repent and should cause us to, I think, protest in appropriate ways. Still, the Lord might be using to protect us from we know not what. And we should be therefore patient and non-reactive.

And I think you see that within the prophets where they're able to condemn the sins of Assyria and Babylon, even while recognizing the Lord's providential hand in causing them to rise up as powers. And that sense, ultimately, we are in the hands of God, is sometimes terrifying when the whole nation is falling. But yet, at the same time, there is that message within Jonah that even if you're cast out of the ship of the stable political order and cast into the storm of the larger politics of the region and the forces of the north and the south in conflict and this rising power of Babylon, and whatever it is, that ultimately, the Lord is able to bring a big fish to swallow you up.

That may be an exile, but ultimately, he's going to achieve his purposes through this. And so that sense of providential rule really should not be underplayed. It's something that pervades the Old and New Testament.

The character of Saul is not an accident. The figures of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar actually serves as a guardian, and he becomes a very perverse, proud guardian. But then the Lord is even able to work in his heart and transform him, give him the heart of a man.

And what we see within this is just a sense of how small human power is for all of its pretensions. And that is, particularly at times of wicked people in rule, a great relief for all that it aims to achieve for itself. God is ultimately able to come down and confuse their languages, etc.

Amen. Amen. And I wonder, too, if it also gives us that at the heart of the government of the cosmos is God the Father.

Sort of what we see in that little microcosm of the monarchy. That actually is real cosmically. That at the heart of the government of this cosmos is not a dualistic conflict between good and evil.

But is the hand of God who is the perfection of goodness. And everything that happens under the sun is happening in his providential ordering of things. That is, I don't think anything could be more significant to political imagination than that.

And that is what we have access to as God's people. The rest that that brings, the hope that that brings, the sense of purpose that that brings. That our actions do matter.

Because actually, no human power can obstruct the work of the Lord through his little people, his little saints. You know, how often in scripture there are these big powers doing their thing on the world stage. And yet it's the barren little peasant woman through whose womb God's going to take her to turn the world upside down.

And that just comes up again and again. That if you're one of the Lord's, your works, however minuscule in the eyes of the world, might have more to do with world history than the machinations of the mighty. You know, and I don't think that's just kind of self-inflating rhetoric.

I just think it's how the Bible speaks. It's how it teaches us to think. And so much of the prophets is, I think, ordered towards cultivating that sort of imagination.

For a nation that sees itself embroiled within those sorts of conflicts. And very much the victim of those. That it's on the losing side in history as it faces these big powers of Egypt to Syria and Babylon.

Ultimately recognizing that God is the one in control. And that those forces are, they are the pawns. And that the Lord is actually the one whose master of the entire board just gives a sort of rest and confidence, even when everything is collapsing.

Absolutely. And how then does that, and this might be for another conversation, but how then does that enable us to turn back to our practical questions in our particular political context and do those good works with good hearts. And therefore do some good.

Because it seems to me that far too much Christian rhetoric of late and perhaps long before even the COVID situation has in some ways already accepted the terms of the human political situation as the terms and reacted accordingly. And is not acting as if it has confidence in the Lord's rule over this situation. And his working through it, even through the injustices of it.



And a correct response to that. I think I find it always instructive when you think about the example of the apostle Paul who he was mistreated by government. If anyone was mistreated by government, Paul was.

And yet the way that he can talk about government is arresting and something that shocks people within the modern age who have very benign government by comparison. I think that we feel something of the shock in part because we maybe don't have the same sense of divine providence and human affairs that he does. And yet, I think also we have a duty of speaking about the sins of government, speaking about the failures and incompetence of government and thinking about, okay, how do we think about those times when it seems like there's a conflict between what God would require of us and what government requires of us? And so I think we should probably leave that for the time being, register those concerns as ones that we really need to get into in depth in a coming conversation.

But as a foundation to start from, recognizing God's providential overrule of and rule of government and the fact that all human government is penultimate, I think is perhaps the most fundamental scriptural teaching that contextualizes everything else. I absolutely agree with that. If God is not king, then it is a war of all against all.

And this is a very different situation. So much more to say about that, but I agree. And that is actually a very encouraging note to sustain throughout.

Thank you.