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Politics after Christendom with David VanDrunen

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Any Christian trying to formulate a political theology cannot afford to ignore the impressive work done by David VanDrunen over the past decade. In this long-ish interview, Kevin asks Dave about two kingdoms theology, natural law, the purpose of government, and the importance of the Noahic Covenant. Stick around and you'll also learn what VanDrunen means by "conservative liberalism" and "legal polycentrism." You'll also hear what Kevin and Dave would do (or not do) if they were starting a Presbyterian colony on Mars.

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Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World

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Ask Pastor John: 750 Bible Answers to Life's Most Important Questions

Transcript

Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin D. Young, senior pastor at Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina.

And today I am joined by my guest, David VanDrunen. Dave, thank you for being here. You have a J.D. and a Ph.D. and you are the professor of systematic theology and Christian ethics at Westminster, Seminary, California.

You have written a number of books around two kingdoms, a natural law, and really, we're going to talk about the capstone to this project, unless maybe there's more coming. But this book published just a couple of years ago, Politics after Christendom, Political Theology in a Fraction World. So Dave, thanks for getting up early there in California.

And joining us for Life and Books and Everything. It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

So let me ask, VanDrunen sounds like a good Dutch name. It is? Yes. It's slightly Americanized like your Dutch name.

It is, I know. But yes, it is a good Dutch name. And where the VanDrunen, I know, so I was born in South Holland, Illinois.

And I know the VanDrunen is there. Where are your VanDrunen from? Well, if I didn't know you're from South Holland, that's very interesting. That is where the VanDrunen is landed in the 1850s.

So those VanDrunen are my people, although I grew up in the West suburbs of Chicago. So about a half hour drive away from where you grew up. Okay, but they're all right.

So we have some VanDrunen. They're not my relatives that I'm aware of, though. You know how the Dutch bingo goes.

It doesn't take long before. It's like, we're 4th cousins. Yes, it may be something like that.

If you grew up in South Holland, you probably know more VanDrunen than I do. Yeah, yeah. I moved to Michigan when I was in 3rd grade.

But yeah, that's where I was born. That's where the Deungs came to Minnesota in the 1840s or so. But then settled in Chicago eventually.

So anyways, lots of good Dutch connections. Thank you for this book. So let's jump in and let me tell you where I'm coming from.

First of all, I want to encourage listeners, watchers out there. If you haven't read Dave's stuff on this topic, I'm not trying to flatter him. He really is extremely thoughtful.

And the scholarship that's gone into this whole project is really impressive. And this book that we're going to be talking about today, politics after Christendom, is bringing a lot of the fruit of that labor. It's still, yeah, I would say, academic in a way, but very accessible book.

And even if you don't agree with everything in these 400 pages, I would say to anyone out there who's saying, how do I make? How should I think about politics? How should I even Christian nationalism, which was a bit not quite on the front page when this book came out? But I would encourage everyone to really deal seriously with Dave's work in this area. And as we'll see as we go along in this discussion, I think I agree with, I don't know, 85% of where I think you net and where you land on this. So I'm going to give you opportunity to explain.

And then I may ask you some questions and push back along the way just to try to understand any differences that we might have. But let me start with, how did you get interested in this whole big project and how long have you been researching and writing in this area? Yeah, it seems like it's been a big part of my life. I mean, I had interests in, I guess, world affairs, political affairs since I was pretty young.

And so I had a lot of these things kind of turning around in my mind even a long time ago. And when I began my theological studies, the whole issues surrounding Christianity and culture, as they're often put, were of great interest to me. And I started trying to poke around in some of these things.

And I was, I was generally less than, I was less than fully satisfied with sort of the reformed, contemporary reformed literature that I was reading. So this is sort of late 20th century, reformed conversations about this. And I ended up going to law school after my master of divinity.

And that was really for more for academic reasons than for professional reasons. I was not, I was not planning on becoming a full time practicing attorney. I had my site set on the gospel ministry.

But I just, I had, I had some desire to be writing on issues of law and theology and Christianity and culture to be thinking about this. And I was even during my legal studies, I was, I started to read some of this older reformed literature. And as you know, I

mean, we've been blessed the last few decades with this kind of an enormous amount of early reform.

I mean, I had a lot of early reform literature that people in the generation before us didn't have, and at least in English and, and it's just accessible to us in a way that it wasn't. And, and I was, I was fighting in some of this older reformed literature, ideas such as natural law, the two kingdoms distinction. And these were things that were not part of my own seminary education.

I mean, I think those of us who were trained even in reformed institutions in the late 90s didn't hear much about these things. Or if we heard about them, they were presented as not as reformed ideas. And so that just got me thinking.

And as I went into my PhD research, and then in my early, my early life as a professor trying to get my kind of scholarly, scholarly plan, some scholarly work going. This was just a natural way for me to try to sort of a plan for my scholarship and my writing. So what I really wanted to do was some more constructive work.

But I, I sort of felt like I needed to get a better grasp of the history of reform thinking about these things. And then actually the earlier history medieval thinking before that. So my first big project was really historical.

That was my book, natural law and the two kingdoms. And then I was able to move into more constructive direction. Once I felt like I had some of that history behind me.

And the culmination of that as you are indicating is this book politics after Christendom, which really tries to bring together some of my historical work and my kind of biblical theological work on these things. And to try to put to try to put a more, I'm not sure I could say more practical, but in a sense trying to wrestle with this question of what are we doing in this world? How do we relate as Christians to our political communities? What's what place do we have within them? What sort of contribution can we make for them? What sort of expectation should we have from them? So I think if people out there have know something about your work, they probably identify it first of all with two kingdoms. So tell us what do you mean by two kingdoms? And when I find people, when they ask me, Kevin, are you a two kingdoms guy? I always want to say, well, what do you, what do you mean by the two kingdoms? That, that nomenclature goes back a long way.

So I'm happy to own it. But I also know that some people hear some things in it that I don't always want to give to myself, or they will say, maybe you get this, are you a radical two kingdoms? Which just means like, it's bad, right? So what do you mean by the two kingdoms? And how is this important for this politics after Christendom book? Yes, I think you're wise to ask what people mean by it. What, what I mean by it is, I think in its, in its basic idea is pretty much what so many early reformed theologians meant by

it, which is God is the ruler of all things.

There's no question about that. He is the sovereign lord of the whole creation. But there is a kind of twofold rule of God that we see in this world as described in scripture.

On the one hand, he is the sovereign creator and the sustainer of all things. He upholds the natural order. He upholds the broader human social order by his common grace.

It's a fallen world, and yet God upholds it and preserves many good things in it, including family economies, political and legal orders. On the other hand, God has also established his redemptive rule in this world. He has a plan of salvation.

He has called a covenant people out of this world. He has sent his son in order to bring redemption. And so we, we as Christians live under both of God's rules.

So we, God continues to uphold this world in which we live day by day. And God is also building his church through Jesus Christ and the way that God rules his people in his church as he advances that redemptive rule is not identical with the way that God rules the world more broadly. You might, I think this maps quite closely to the distinction we make between God's common grace and God's saving grace.

We don't see an absolute dichotomy between them. They, there's, you might say there's mutual support between them in certain respects, but we don't want to confuse God's common grace with God's special grace. So I think this is especially important in thinking about our political communities because I believe that God upholds and sustains our political communities as part of his work of common grace and that we as Christians, we have responsibilities.

We have callings in this broader world. It is, I don't think every Christian has to be, has to be overly politically minded. But it is, it is a good and valid vocation for Christians to be involved in politics.

And yet we do that remembering that this is not a distinctively Christian vocation. It is something that we share along with our unbelieving neighbors. So let's talk about that a little bit more.

You say this is kind of one of your thesis statements at the beginning of the book, Civil Government, ordained by God. So it's instituted by God. So it's legitimate, but it's provisional.

It's not absolute. And then you say it's common, and you just explain some of that, but accountable. And I think that's important because that's what you're saying.

It's under the Lordship of Christ. It doesn't mean that the kings or the presidents or our laws are not subject to the lordship of Christ, but it's common, still accountable. So let's

press into that.

And how would you respond to this simple, I would say, kind of syllogism that you often hear and it goes with the phrase, no neutrality. So somebody would say, look, there's no neutrality. You either are for God, and you have Christ, or you're an idolater, and so even on this, map this onto the newer Christian nationalism discussion, people will say, well, you're going to have, if you don't have Christian nationalism, there's no neutrality.

You're going to have pagan nationalism. And your national society and your laws and your system of government, it's going to bow to some sort of God because we're irreducibly religious. And so if you don't want it to bow to a false God, you want it to be under the lordship of a true God, and that means Christ, ergo Christian nationalism.

What do you do with that no neutrality argument? Yeah, I mean, as you say, I have, I've argued that our political communities, our civil government are, are meant to be common, that it is actually God's plan, God's purpose in this world, to have civil governments that are not just for us as believers, but are meant to promote peace and keep a measure of justice among all human beings. And yet I, I pair that idea of commonality with this idea of accountability. And so I would agree with that reasoning to an extent.

I do believe that all human beings, all human institutions are accountable to God, are under God's law in, in some form, even those who don't know God's law as revealed in scripture are under God's law as revealed in the natural order. And the way that I especially tried to bring out the accountability of all people and all institutions, even in the common grace order, is through the study of the Noetic Covenant that that God instituted after the great flood. And I would say that this is certainly a key part of my alternative or my response to that sort of reasoning that you were relating a moment ago, is God himself has entered a covenant with this entire human race, with the entire created order.

And as part of that covenant, God has instituted what we might call the sword of justice. So in Genesis 9 verse 6, God says, he who sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed. And that is a commission given to the entire human race, to be doing justice.

And so when any civil ruler, when anyone who is participating in the political order has a share in that justice, they are ultimately accountable to God. But the thing that I think is really important here is that God himself has instituted this civil sword and this justice to be for the entire human community, and not to be an exclusively, distinctively Christian thing. And so yes, I think it is true that we are religious beings.

We, all of us, are obedient or disobedient to God in the various callings that he has given to us. And yet it's important for us to understand the nature of the institutions in which we operate in ways that accord with the way God himself has established them. So I

would say that in order to be obedient in our political callings, we ought to pursue them in ways that are consistent with God's purposes, which we see as embodied in that covenant with Noah.

Yeah, so let's talk about that's a good segue because the Noeic covenant is really central to this book, into your whole project. And so just for those who may not be as familiar with the contours of covenant theology, typical Reformed covenant theology sees one singular covenant of grace, a covenant of that that has different expressions. And the Noeic covenant is unique in that and that God makes it with all people, with all creatures after the flood.

It's this promise never again to destroy the world with a flood. And so you already mentioned the institution of justice there. And so it is a different kind of covenant of just grabbing here.

Here's what Boving says the covenant, this covenant with Noah, though it is rooted in God's grace and is intimately bound up with the actual covenant of grace, because it sustains and prepares for it, is not identical with it. It is rather a covenant of long suffering made by God with all humans and even with all creatures. It limits the curse on the earth.

It checks nature and curbs its destructive power. The awesome violence of water is rained in a regular alteration of seasons is introduced. So it's a common grace promise encompassing all living things, though it is still an expression of that one thread of the covenant of grace does does Boving capture what you mean by it and where if anyplace do you disagree with how Boving's own political theology would then spin out? Yeah, I think Boving puts it quite well.

I do agree with that widespread reform conviction that there is a single covenant of grace all the way through redemptive history. But I do think it is really important to see that this covenant with Noah after the flood is something distinct, that it actually makes no redemptive promises, which is quite remarkable when you think about that. You know, there's no promise of a Messiah, no promise of forgiveness of sins or everlasting life.

There's no stipulations and sanctions in the same way that other covenants operate. Yeah, that's right. That's right.

And so it is now it is serving that one covenant of grace. And the way I like to put it sometimes is that if there was no Noah covenant, there would be no human race in which Christ could enter and no human race for Christ to save. So this common grace covenant is essential for the larger plan of salvation without itself actually administering this saving grace.

And so I think the way Boving puts it is quite good. I mean, obviously I have sort of my own, the way I've explained it is sort of setting up my own arguments here. But I think I'm definitely part of that stream of the Reformed tradition, which sees the Noah covenant as something quite distinct from the other biblical covenants.

So how would you respond? And I think you've done really good work in highlighting. I mean, when people talk about covenant theology, even, you know, I teach that course sometimes here at RTS and it's easy to the Noah covenant doesn't seem to have as much in it as the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic coming, you go pretty quickly. So you've done a really good job at trying to draw a lot of important implications.

But one pushback might be, in fact, I have sometimes said to people, I think I net out basically where Van Druneen nets out on the sort of political order that he's envisioning. And I think he's done, you've done a good job with the Noah covenant. But sometimes I said to people, I'm not sure I can get all of those conclusions from the Noah covenant.

So just respond to that, that, you know, mild critique that someone might have, hey, can you really get all the way that all the places you want to go from the Noah covenant? Well, I could probably take the rest of this podcast to try to give an answer. But I will, I will try to be concise. Yeah, I think I would perhaps say, I'll try to say two things fairly briefly in response.

And you can see if you'd like to follow up. But I would say, on the one hand, if you're looking at my book, they're it's basically divided into two mostly equal parts. And I would say the first part, which kind of spins out a political theology, I do believe that what is there, for the most part, is it really is grounded in the Noah covenant, whereas the second part of the book where which I call political ethics, I'd say that's more extrapolation.

That is more an attempt, I would say a kind of a creative attempt to say, now, given this theological foundation, how might we think about some classical questions about political and legal theory? And so I would say I can completely understand if not everyone would come to all of those same conclusions, and I think we could share the same basic theology of the Noah covenant without coming to all those conclusions. So I would say that that's one part of my answer. But I would also, I would say then that I think if all we had was the text of Genesis eight and nine, it would probably be more precarious for me to argue all of the conclusions that I have theologically.

But I would say that I think the conclusions that I have drawn from those from that text in Genesis, it's confirmed by the rest of the story of scripture. And I think it actually, my interpretation makes sense of a lot of what we find in the rest of scripture, which is that although God has established this, what we might call this covenant of grace community through the Abrahamic household, the Israelite theocratic nation, and now the new covenant church, that God continues to have this, this plan of sustaining this broader

world and raising up legitimate political and legal authorities in this world, in which we see God's people in various ways participating in, and acknowledging a kind of legitimacy in them. And I think especially as we get to the New Testament, and we find relatively little about civil government, I mean, it's not nothing but it's relatively little.

I think what we find is exactly the sort of things that I am grounding in the New Way covenant is that civil governments are regarded in the New Testament as legitimate, and yet provisional, they're not the ultimate thing, and yet they have a legitimate authority. And yet in the New Testament, these civil magistrates are, they are common. You don't have to be a Christian to hold legitimate office, and yet they're still the idea that civil magistrates are accountable ultimately to God.

So it seems to me that the rest of scripture really confirms and what I'm getting from the New Way covenant, and then in turn, I would say the rest of scripture sheds a certain light upon how we read those texts for Genesis. Yeah, I think that's a fair response. And I really like what you did with Romans 13 toward the end, because obviously that's a go-to text in the New Testament, and any Christian political theory needs to talk about that.

But I agree with you, and you're trying to reach some fairly modest conclusions from Romans 13, meaning the government that punishes evil, okay, it's given the sword. Ultimately, what a lot of our political theology comes down to is that bearing of the sword. What at the end of the day do you think the government can do by coercion? What does the government have the sword to say, finally, you have to do that, or the government is going to either imprison you or inflict punishment or finds that that power of coercion? So you have an argument that I find compelling for a fairly limited conception of government, though you're clear to say, you're not trying to weigh in on every contemporary argument, and there's a difference between what government may do and what government has to do.

And then, I wonder if you can say just a little bit about this, because this is really helpful, when it talks about the government in Romans 13 praising the good. So I think a lot of discourse right now is landing on that and saying, well, what is the good? Well, the supreme good, the human flourishing good is to worship Christ. And if the government is to praise and support the good, that good we know as Christians is to obey both tables of the law, to worship him in a proper way.

Therefore, the government must praise those. It must be directing us on all of its subjects toward this ultimate good, which we know as Christians must be the worship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. How do you understand the good in Romans 13? Yeah, well, too, if I could just respond to the earlier part of what you're saying, and then I'll try to get to that, that final question.

As you say, I try not to take any kind of overly detailed position on what exactly the government should do, or what the government should punish. I think there's plenty of

legitimate room for debate among Christians on that point. And I don't think I said Jesus of scripture is going to solve that in detail.

But I do observe a very interesting thing when we read in in Genesis 9 and the Noe covenant that that institution of the sword for the sake of justice, it is that God instituted that sword of justice there for the resolution of intra-human dispute and especially intra-human violence. And I think that's especially interesting to know in that insofar as the civil government, as again, I would not say that Genesis 9 immediately institutes civil government. What it institutes is the sword of justice, which I think we can see develops into civil governments.

But it's not there in order to resolve disputes about how we worship God, our religious doctrine. It's there to punish the violent and to keep a measure of peace within the human community. And I think that's important background to keep in mind as we go to Romans 13.

And I make an extensive argument, as you know in my book, that really Genesis 9 lies behind what's going on in Romans 13. This is not coming out of nowhere. And Romans 13 one through seven is really interesting in context, because you have in this kind of last major section of Romans beginning in 12-1, extending through chapter 15, you have really Paul's longest exposition of the Christian life in any of his epistles.

And it's so beautiful, the kind of Christian life that he sets out there, this life of mutual edification and love and trying to please others rather than ourselves. But in the midst of that, we find Romans 13 one through seven. And it really stands out in that in these verses, Paul doesn't talk about redemption.

He doesn't mention the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's not setting forth the contours of the Christian life in all the same way that he's doing in that surrounding text. He actually is grounding it in the created order.

He uses this root word of and it's really a creation order sort of idea that Paul lays out there. And it strikes me that when he just uses these two simple terms, good and bad, he doesn't expound this in terms of that larger holiness and righteousness in the surrounding text. And then I think we have to remember that Nero is probably the emperor of Rome at this time.

And I think we have to ask ourselves the question. Paul is he's exhorting us as Christians to be submissive to our civil magistrates, even to someone like Nero who was notorious for his, he was not a good man. And so so so I would say that what what we read about good and evil there, we read that against the background of the no way a covenant.

This is for the purposes of civil order and civil peace. Paul is not envisioning Nero or other Roman officials as having a kind of a grand view of the righteousness that is in

Christ and the civil magistrate is somehow the arbiter of true religion. Yeah, that's good.

Let me I want to get into some specifics. In just a moment, I do want to mention our first sponsor. That's this thing, Crossway, sponsoring LBE.

I want to mention here during the Advent season, it's a new book by Jonathan Gibson, Ocomo, come a manual, a liturgy for daily worship from Advent to Epiphany. So if he has his first volume, be thou my vision. And then this one is specific for the Advent season.

It's really well done. If you don't have, you should get both books there. I say they're like a Presbyterian kind of book of common prayer, but they're good for any any Christian to go through and they prevent 40 day devotional liturgy with readings you can do on your own.

You could do in a small group, you could do with your family. So check that out from Crossway. One of the key sections in your book is this starts on page 117, the redemption of political community and civil government.

Just some of some of the headings here. First, Christ does not save or redeem political institutions. Second, Christians are not to seek the transformation of political institutions, according to the moral patterns of Christ's kingdom.

These institutions cannot coherently manifest the peaceable vision of Christ's kingdom while fulfilling the responsibility to enforce coercion backed justice. And then you say, the, I put in my margin here, this is key. The origin nature and purpose of common political communities lie in the provisional Noeic covenant.

And thus they serve to advance the preservation of the present world for a time when Christ returns reveals a new Jerusalem, the services of Noeic political institutions will no longer be needed. Thanks be to God. So unpack some of these key convictions for us because many Christians, and I'm agreeing with you, many Christians might say what? Of course, Christ is to redeem our political institutions.

Christ is to save our nation. What do you mean by this contention that we should not be seeking to make the moral Christ's moral kingdom be the kind of template for our political order? Yes, in in grounding our in the Noeic covenant. So we've been talking about this and just to make it to try to make it really clear if it hasn't come out yet is that I'm strongly, I'm strongly convinced that we as Christians, as we are involved in our political communities and trying to promote what's good in them, that we try to advance the purposes that God himself has established for our political communities.

And what these purposes are, are purpose preservation, their purposes of common grace. In other words, they're not the purposes of trying to bring in or some way realize Christ everlasting kingdom, that kingdom that cannot be shaken that Hebrews 12 speaks of. And so what I'm arguing in those sections then is that when we put on our political

glasses, we are not we're not looking at them.

We're not looking at our Christ kingdom in them or in some way that these institutions would themselves realize Christ kingdom. What we might think of it is that if these political institutions are doing their work, preserving a measure of peace and justice in this world, it provides opportunity for the church to be doing its work. And yet we should not confuse that.

So the purposes of civil government as we see it either in Genesis 9 or Romans 13, 1 Peter 2, they are order keeping, you might say they are preservative in their purpose. Scripture doesn't give to them some sort of place in advancing Christ kingdom or another way we might look at it. In Matthew 16, Christ gives to his church and only to his church the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

What does he give to the civil magistrate in Romans 13? He gives it the sort of justice and those are two very very different things. The sort of justice isn't going to unlock the gates of the kingdom of heaven. So let me follow up on that, Dave, because this section in particular that I was just reading from has received some some pushback.

So I'd love for you to respond. I don't know. Did you read this response from Oliver O'Donovan review to your book in 2021 Journal of Law and Religion? I know you talk about O'Donovan in your book, but this of course is reviewing your book.

And so you wouldn't respond to that in the book itself, but he says the heart of Van Drunan's and I'll let you respond to this, but he says anti-historicism. So that's one of his knocks as he says it's anti-historical, doesn't connect to the history and development of this. And he says you're too dismissive of medieval Christendom is just really bad in Augustine and Calvin, got this wrong.

So he says he Christ does not redeem political structures, believers, and other morally serious people must not try to transform political structures. Only the church and not the city prevails at the end of the time. And then with the kind of rhetorical flourish at the very end, he says the medieval theologians for all their lack of printed Bibles and poor hygiene made more effective use of more scripture in their political theology than David Van Drunan does.

So how would you respond to O'Donovan's argument, which I think is that you haven't given history and I don't know I think you do give a lot of scripture. So I'm not sure where that is coming from, but go ahead open Mike, respond to O'Donovan's criticisms of your book and in particular that you're not taking seriously how this has played out in history and the history of Christian interpretation. Yeah, there is in that same edition of the Journal of Law and Religion, I do have a brief response to all those right right contributors.

So I don't remember exactly what I said there, but any readers who would like to hear more of my response can see it there. Yeah, I mean, I would certainly take the position that there is there were some fundamental misinterpretations of the state in Christian theology for that period of Christendom, which is a lot of Christian history. So I mean, I think and I think we who are reformed, we believe that we need we needed a Reformation, we do need to be thinking critically about our forebears in the faith.

So I have tried to wrestle with earlier reformed writers and I think I take them quite seriously, but I do think we need to we recognize that they were fallible and we need to I think what might what might possibly give the impression that I haven't used as much scripture as earlier theologians is the fact that I don't think that all of scripture has the same sort of relevance for thinking about our political communities as some other theologian. So if if there's a theologian who is convinced that we should think of our political communities today in sort of theocratic ways, then that means that what was going on under the mosaic economy, what we find for civil law under the mosaic law and what the kings of Israel were doing are in the way we think about our political communities today. I am making the argument.

In fact, I could say it's it's one of my fundamental arguments is that our political communities today under God's common grace order are very different from the mosaic civil order. God had instituted the mosaic civil order and that is or that that was normative for God's old covenant people, but it was with the purpose of creating and sustaining Israel as a holy nation. And in fact, that's not what our political governments today are called to be.

We're not called to make the United States a holy nation. And so although I certainly believe that there's much that we learn about justice and righteousness by reading the mosaic law or by studying the Israelite kings, I am not looking to those texts as in some way directly prescriptive for what our civil governments ought to look like. So sometimes when people ask me and I just need to give a very shorthand, Kevin, what's your political theology or philosophy? How would you design things? And I'm pretty happy with not everything, but I like the American founders.

I like the system of government that they that they came up with. They are animated by a desire for liberty. So I think it's a I think it's intellectually indefensible to to just draw a straight line from the magisterial reformers to the American founding generation and say, look, they all kind of have the same view of God and state and I think no, there's some very significant differences.

At the same time, it is true. And even more so in the 19th century in America than the 18th century, Christianity and evangelical Protestant Christianity is a kind of public truth. And this is where I think there's some some some people get confused.

It's one thing to say, wouldn't it be nice and for Christianity to have the kind of

purchasing power like it once did that there's shared assumptions, not cultural Christianity in terms of nominalism, but a kind of Christian culture that if you quote the Bible, you know, at a school board meeting, it it has authority. People don't want to be on the wrong side of the Bible. Now, I still think Christians have every right and should mention the Bible.

We shouldn't set that aside as that doesn't count as a source of moral wisdom in our world. But I think we look back and look wistfully and say how that went when Christianity had this was this public truth that people assumed and you didn't want to be on the wrong side of it. So that's one thing it's another thing to say what then ought to be enforceable by the power of the sword.

So sometimes what I do in my mind, and I love to hear practically if if you and I were starting a Presbyterian colony on Mars, so we're taking, you know, some good people from the PCA, the OPC. Okay, let's pretend they can all get along for for a bit. And, you know, we're starting a modest size, 5,000 people, and we're starting a Presbyterian colony on Mars, and we have to set up our system of government.

So would you be in favor of Sabbath laws, laws that don't allow there to be work on Sunday? Would you be in these are not rhetorical questions. I'm serious. Would you be in favor of something in that written constitution that as an aspirational statement said we are a godly commonwealth that means to honor Christ.

What would your how much of a Christian ethos would you with your understanding of political theology be comfortable as you and I start our you don't call it a Presbyterian colony because it's a common. So just but just run with the thought experiment. Yeah, so I mean, I would I would want to say and getting to this last comment that you made I would want to be very clear if if we are doing this, we have a we have our Presbyterian church, we need some sort of civil order as well, and I would not view that as a civil order.

I would say, I believe that we need to establish the civil government in a way that is consistent with the government under the no way a covenant under Romans 13. And that would mean I would think something like the First Amendment of the United States would be a good model that I don't think gives Christianity a sort of privileged place or that those who do not embrace Christianity have some sort of disadvantaged place. So I would want our civil order to provide a kind of a maximal amount of liberty for us to live together peacefully and to give the church a maximal liberty to do its work of proclaiming the gospel and shepherding God's people.

But what I be comfortable with Sunday laws, I think you asked about that. And I would say no, I would not be because I think for this simple reason is that I believe when it comes down to it, it's really only Christians who can understand why we rest on the first day of the week and who really have the privilege of doing that. It's because we've been

raised up with Christ who was raised on the first day of the week.

It's only believers who really have the privilege from God of being able to rest first and then do their work through the rest of the week. It's really a picture of our justification. And so I would say something like a Sabbath laws, which would be trying to enforce as the Westminster standards put it, the Christian Sabbath would be inappropriate for a civil order, which is not designed, I would say simply for Christians, even if all the people who are founding this colony in Mars were professing Christians, it would seem to me that we do not set up that civil government in a way that privileges those who profess Christianity.

Even though we would hope that all those people do, which we do of course for our current society, we want all people to profess Christ. We preach that gospel promiscuously, but I don't want to establish, and I think even if we could start from scratch, I would not be looking to establish a specifically uniquely Christian order. Do you think it was, again, this is a genuine question.

I'm curious what you would say. Do you think it was a good thing when the finally with was it the Lawrence decision that anti-sodomy laws were struck down in the United States or would those have had a, again, not arguing to go, I wouldn't argue to go back there. For this reason, I don't think it's politically tenable.

I don't think it's a discussion that's going to be helpful to advance any of the things that I want to advance right now because I just, but I also would have to admit, those laws are on the books. I'm not going to stand up and say, yeah, I don't think we should have it. Probably, I think I probably would have been with Charles Hodge, who was very concerned about, as most Presbyterians were in the 19th century, with the Sabbath laws changing, with mail being delivered on Sunday, I totally follow your reasoning.

I also think if I were there historically, I would have found myself saying, yes, let's give freedom, religious liberty, first amendment. But insofar as our country has laws that express something of our Christian sensibilities that we should hold on to those as long as it's politically tenable, and there's a strong majority to support them. So how would you view that, in particular, that kind of controversial test case with sodomy laws, which have been on the books for most of American history? Yeah.

I would want to make a distinction between, say, a Sunday law and a sodomy law. Yeah. So with regard to the sodomy law, I think we, I would want to argue very strongly, this is this is not a uniquely Christian sort of position.

And what I mean by that is that this is not something that we need the special revelation of the Christian scriptures in order to show us that this is something that is immoral, that is destructive for human life. I mean, this is something I think we can see from Romans 1, if nowhere else, that abhorrent sexuality is something which is against the natural

order. It's part of the natural law.

And its testimony impresses itself upon all human beings. So I would want to say that I don't think we as Christians want to give the impression that something like being anti sodomy is a uniquely Christian thing. I say this is a human thing.

This is something that is in accord with the natural order. So I don't have the same objections or concerns about that as I would something like a Sabbath law, which really does depend upon uniquely Christian revelation. The only way to know that Sunday is the Sabbath is by the testimony of the New Testament.

So I maybe like you. I don't have a dogmatic opinion on whether sort of in theory should sodomy be civil law. I think Christians, if that was possible, I think we both agree that this is really not tenable at this point in history.

So it's probably not worth spending much time on it. But if it was possible, I think Christians could debate whether that is something we ought to prohibit. But I think it's something that is within the realm of debate, because it's not something that would establish a Christian order.

So I mean, on your concern about Sunday mail or something like that, which was a 19th century kind of debate, I do think we could there could be there could be legitimate debates about, do we try to protect workers? Do we try to, yeah, you know, are there other reasons for keeping social order and social peace that we might prohibit work on certain days or certain times? I think that's that also was a kind of debate that is legitimate for Christians to have. What I'm concerned about is instituting something like a Christian Sabbath as the official law in a way that establishes Christianity and in a way that disadvantages or in a sense disestablishes those with other kinds of religious beliefs. Yeah, no, that's helpful.

And it's a good distinction you're making about what can be ascertained by natural law. I was doing a review for RTS Journal on the Leiden Synopsis, which has just been republished and I commend it to people. And the section on the fourth commandment was maybe the most fascinating thing.

And you do see some of the some of the differences between maybe a continental view of the Sabbath and the Lord's Day and what's in the Westminster Confession. But one of the things that they kind of made the point that you just made there that you can know, because we just say the Ten Commandments is the natural what you can know by general revelation. And the questions often ask, well, really, can you know that you're supposed to rest on Saturday and now you're supposed to rest on Sunday just from the natural order? And I think the Leiden Synopsis basically says, no, you do need Christian revelation to tell you that what you can get though is a sense of, you know, the rhythm of rest or that you need to have that we that we are made to worship God and they're

ought to be freedom to be set aside to worship God.

So they take a more modest approach to what can be known from natural law for the ordering of the fourth commandment. But it brings me to this question of law and the purpose of government. One of the most helpful sections in the book and people should not skip over it's really just a few pages but these categories are really helpful.

You know, there's a long tradition in Western political theory about the difference between positive rights and negative rights. We, you know, especially Americans, we love to talk about rights, but people toss around very quickly like you have a, you have a right to life and then you have a right to health care. Well, those are two very different kinds of rights.

One is a right that someone not take something from me and the other is asserted as a right that some someone must provide for me. So along those lines, you say that government, you can look at three broad kinds of functions. It could have a protectionist function, a perfectionist, or to provide services.

Those are really helpful categories. Just say a little bit what you mean by each of those and how they're different. Does government exist to protect things to perfect or to provide services? Yeah, I think it's quite clear from scripture that government does have a protectionist function.

That seems to come out, it comes out very explicitly in some of the texts we've been talking about like Genesis 9 and Romans 13. By bearing the sword, the government protects those who are, hopefully the government protects those that are weak and innocent and punishes those who do what is wrong. So that that's what's meant by the protectionist purpose of government.

The whole idea of the perfectionist purpose or the alleged of government is really to make us better people to build virtue. And really that I think is what is driving a lot of some of the debates that have been in the background of the questions you've been asking behind certain things like Christian nationalism. It's this idea that we want to be a godly people and that and not just not just godly in a kind of a peaceful, civil way, but a holistically godly people and that civil government ought to play a key role in that as it tries to teach us virtue and tries to punish people, not necessarily for for harming others for violence to others, but trying to correct their vices.

And I make the argument that I I don't think that is a proper purpose of civil government. I think if civil government is doing its protectionist job well, it will have as a kind of an effect it does have the that implication consequence of promoting a certain level of virtue in the sense of promoting peaceful behavior, treating people in a fair and upright way in our in our dealings. So that government doesn't exist for that purpose of making us virtuous.

Just to give an example. So maybe laws against prostitution or laws against pornography, you could see them as a perfectionist that's that's making us better people, but you could also see them as protectionist against certain things that are by their very nature going to be harmful to us as people. Would you look at those particular issues through that lens? That's exactly right.

I mean, we could if a prostitution law is before us, I mean, we could to make men chased is that the purpose of the law? It seems to me that that is not exactly why God has instituted civil government in order to build those sorts of virtues. But I do think what government is supposed to do is provide these this protection of the weak to provide justice for those who are taken advantage of by the stronger. And here we could say that the that prostitution prays upon vulnerable women, it encourages a sort of a kind of social disorder in that it tends to break apart families.

So it would seem to me that we ought to debate that issue along those ladder lines rather along the former lines. And then provide services. So what do you mean by that possible government function? Right.

A lot of the classical debates take place simply between perfectionist and protectionist, but it seems to me that a lot of what our government does is actually not strictly speaking one or the other, but it provides services. It builds roads. It provides health care.

It provides public swimming pools or municipal golf courses. I mean, this sort of thing and it's it's not really to promote justice per se or to build virtue, but to try to us that are sort of good for us or promote the good life in some way. And in my book, I I don't want to take an overly aggressive stance on this.

I'm not sure we can find any text in scripture that's going to resolve this for us, but it does seem to me that a more modest view of these things is in order. And I think the the bigger our governments are, the more our governments need to get into the bigger issues of life. So once we start thinking about providing health care or providing public education, which is, I think, another, this is a very big service providing function of of so many governments.

We really ask our governments to be asking really big questions about the meaning of life and kind of ultimate questions about right and wrong. And it seems to me that there are a lot of good reasons, both practically and biblically, that we would want to keep our government functions modest and not have our civil magistrates not having our bureaucrats making the biggest decisions for us about the most important things of life. Yeah, that's a that's a really good way to put it.

And maybe some some simple distinctions in this whole discussion, and especially the larger Christian nationalism discussion, I find myself with a number of things that some

people want to say, government must do this. So no, I don't think you make a case that government must do this, these perfectionist and let alone the providing services. Maybe a difference that you and I might have at times is maybe there's some things that you might say government shouldn't do that, where I might be more comfortable saying, I agree with you, but maybe for less principal, more pragmatic reasons, just what you said right there, Dave, that I anything that I want the government to do against others, I have to think that we're an election away from the government doing that against me.

So I resonate with the founders and their overarching concern for liberty, because I don't trust a government, even if you and I are in charge of the colony of Presbyterians, that it is going to always be on our winning side. And so I would in the long haul, I would rather say, let's have a government that excels at keeping order providing what you say, this no way, a common grace kind of justice, so that we can pursue our visions of the good and have this religious freedom. So that's where I land almost all of these points, I think in the same place.

And maybe at times I would say, well, I'm not sure it would be wrong if the government would do those things, but I don't think it's wise, and I have enough of the Federalist papers and combating ambition against ambition to think, I don't want the government to be doing that. And I think historically that's one of the reasons you make there's a big move from the Magistero Reformers to the American founding, because you know what, they found that even in a country with a very broad Protestant consensus, they could not agree and let alone having to work with Catholic countries. That's why Locke writes his letter on toleration and why he makes some of the arguments he does in his second treatise is because he's seeing Protestants are being persecuted.

No, it would be better than a Christian nationalism is if Christians weren't killed. And that very term nationalism, of course, is used rather anachronistically because people weren't talking in terms of nationalism. I want to give you a chance to sum up what this project is about.

We're past the hour mark, but if you can say just a couple more minutes, and I want to mention our last ad from Desiring God, thank you to GG and encourage you to check out the Ask Pastor John podcast and the new book, which is collating a lot of those podcast episodes, 750 biblical answers to life, most important questions, and makes use of 1,800 plus episodes in the archive. So if you want to know what John Piper thinks about government or a thousand other things, check out that new book coming out. You say at the end, well, you say at the beginning, and you come to say more about it at the end that you describe the vision under this no way covenant in your sense of the biblical parameters for a, I forget if it's a conservative liberalism or I think it's a conservative liberalism.

So give us those terms. What do you mean there by conservative? And what do you

mean by liberalism? Right. Let me start with liberalism.

That's, of course, in our circles, liberalism tends to be a bad word, but in the more classical sense, liberalism refers to something like the American order in which there are broad liberties of freedom of religion, I would not say that scripture teaches liberalism in some sort of straightforward way, but I would say that the kind of political theology that Christian, that scripture sets before us is consistent with the broad idea of liberalism in the sense of the purpose of government is not to establish a holy commonwealth. It's not to privilege the Christian religion or one particular Christian church over others, but to provide people a broad liberty to live their lives and to make important decisions for themselves within the bounds of public peace and justice. And I would just add, I mean, I was, I was thinking about a text that we haven't talked about when you are making your preceding comments on the opening of First Timothy to where Paul tells us as Christians to pray for our civil magistrates.

And how does he teach us to pray for them? It's in order that we might lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness. I mean, we want to pray in ways that scripture instructs us to pray. Paul doesn't pray that his government officials are going to establish a new holy commonwealth like the Commonwealth of Israel or something.

He prays for that we might lead peaceful and quiet lives. And it seems to me that that's what the kind of general vision of a classical liberalism is about establishing a broad peacefulness and quiet and orderly civil society. And then the conservative part is important.

It's a conservative liberalism. A lot of people use liberalism in sort of this grand ideological way that we shouldn't have some sort of theocratic order or something like that because well, there is no truth. There is no true religion that we ought to pursue anyway.

What I would want to say is that our liberalism in so far as we promote a kind of a classical liberalism, it's not a kind of an overarching worldview. It is a it's not a rosian kind of or what people what Patrick Deneen would say is wrong with liberalism, that it's just human autonomy, extreme individualism. You're saying that that's not what you mean.

And we don't have to impute that to all of the the classical exponents of liberalism. That's right. I was I was not going to presume on your listeners knowledge of Rawls and Deneen.

But thank you for mentioning that. Yes. So I think that I would want to promote a kind of a conservative liberalism in a sense that I think what gets to the heart of conservatism in a political sense is or a broader cultural sense is the fact that there is wisdom gained through the ages.

And I think a lot of people in a sort of a radical liberalism in the in the sort of the kind of stuff that Deneen is very concerned about is very destructive. Liberalism is sort of getting rid of the past and throwing off the past, whereas I would say no, there's so much to learn from a broader history of of living together and trying to develop our institutions in ways that actually work. So yes, I think that the political theology of scripture is probably most compatible with a conservative form of liberalism in comparison to other major options that are presented to us today.

So the the last chapter in the book is is worth the proverbial price of the book as as blurbs often say. And just the way of framing it there and you talk about several attributes of each and then you try to you just done a good job there, Dave, of highlighting what you think is the core. So you say just to sum this up for folks.

At the heart, if there's a single big idea in liberalism, classical liberalism, you say it's this idea of pluralism intolerance. And then if there's a single big idea in conservatism, or maybe two two of them, it's the wisdom of the ages and also that we're fallen human beings with Thomas Sol says a constrained vision of humanity. And I do think if you if we built a there's a lot of disagreements, we still have.

But if someone wants to build a political philosophy on those three things, which I agree with you totally there, it's not like a straight line, you read the Noe Covenant, you say, well, there they are. But but the principles are there, and they're there reiterated in different ways like Romans 13, like first Timothy to those three big ideas, a kind of tolerance for religious disagreement, a a respect, and even a deference to the wisdom of the ages, which means it's not progressivism. And then an understanding that we're fallen human beings, and we need a government that works according to how people actually are, not according to the way that we wish them to be.

I think if you put those three things in place, you go a long ways toward the sort of political philosophy that I think the founders had by and large, even with their differences, and that I think is is wise one one last term that I just want you to explain before I let you go, which which is not one I use the words liberalism and conservative and in track with you there. But I haven't used this phrase before. So just explain it to because you say at the the heart maybe of this conservative liberalism is what you call legal polycentrism.

And that's a very important term at several points in your book. Why is that so important? What is legal polycentrism? Yeah, the idea of legal polycentrism is that law emerges from multiple sources rather than just from a single source. So a monocentric view of law, would say something like all of our law, and only our law is what say the legislature says our law is.

And so a polycentric view says actually there are many sources of law, and they they emerge from our interaction. They emerge from various institutions that are doing their

work. They emerge from the customs of a people as they live their life in the trenches of everyday experience.

And that it's actually good for us, just us ordinary people in our lives and also for our courts to be acknowledging these multiple sources of law. And I think that's important. Again, I do try to root this ultimately in the no way a covenant without seeing all the implications as necessarily derived just from the exegesis of that text.

But that our, I believe that our political and legal institutions, they're not imposed from above, you might say, they don't drop down from heaven. God doesn't just establish civil government in the way that he established Israel as a theocratic nation, you might say that they actually emerge over time through the long interaction of peoples. And what we see in the no way covenant is that God actually gives to the human community as a whole, this, this commission to do justice.

And that I think at some level, even though we establish governments in order to serve us, to serve the administration of justice, we don't want to completely hand over our responsibility as law creating and in some sense law enforcing people. And that's part of the idea of holding our governments accountable, of having the rule of law rather than man. And I think a monocentric view of law is very compatible with a kind of an autocratic government.

But a polycentric view of government, I think, is very compatible not only with, I think, the larger story of scripture, but a kind of a government in which we want to hold our government of officials in some sense accountable to the work that they've been doing and see their jurisdiction, their authority as somehow constrained by the larger life and justice of the community. Yeah, it reminded me of it was it is Lord Molten, who has the phrase talking about this middle ground in society, the law of the unenforceable. And his argument was in a healthy society or civilization, you have a big swath in the middle.

So down here, you have what you're allowed to do. And then up here, you have the law, the government enforcing what you can't do. And in a healthy society, you have a big middle ground, the kind of unenforceable.

You know, should you be able to, you know, be on a playground where kids are there and just start shouting obscenities? Well, in a healthy society, say, no, that's just not what we do. And you have churches enforcing that and you have, you know, the media that you get has some sense of decency. And so there's a lot of different factors telling you, you just, you don't do that.

That's not how we behave with one another. When a society becomes sick and degraded, you have license going as far as it can go until law comes all the way down. So unless you stop me from doing this right now, unless you can tell me there's a law on the books.

And that's what I didn't use the term legal polycentricism. But I think that some of what you're getting at is the more we shouldn't think as Christians, the only, okay, we want something to change. We want there to be a greater sense of Christian virtue in our country.

Yes, we should want that. We even would love for America to feel like a godly commonwealth. Okay, that's good.

That's the business of the church being the church. And that's the business of Christians. And in other citizens who have a sense of the right and the wrong to make those things.

And the answer isn't always and sometimes shouldn't be that we just have to have the government to do this thing to feel like we're making a difference in the world. So with that is just a segue. Give us your final thought, your encouragement to any Christians listening to this concerned about what they see, not just in America.

We have listeners from all over the world want their country, their land to be more virtuous, more Christian. What sort of final encouragement or exhortation do you give to people that I'm sure you have lots of them in your own church and churches when you travel around. Yeah.

Well, I appreciate your your last comments. And I think another way to put it is that we want all sorts of healthy institutions. We don't just want, we're not just concerned about our, our institutions.

But we want many, many healthy institutions in our societies. And when they are working well, it has all sorts of benefits for for our our life. And we don't, we shouldn't want government to have to do everything in order to make our lives decent and respectable in this world.

And so I guess to, if I was to sort of summarize things as you've asked, I think that's actually a nice way to transition to that, because I would say for one thing, I would encourage Christians, I do encourage Christians not to become obsessed with the political the way some of our brothers and and sisters are. There are, there are many ways to serve the Lord. There are many institutions by which we serve him.

And in fact, we want to promote healthy institutions wherever we can. Of course, the church first and foremost, but also in all sorts of other areas of life. And what I would say to people is, you know, if if you have some interest in political things, it's good for you to be involved as you can to stay alert to what's going on, to vote to voice your opinion.

But to remember that the Lord is the king of all the earth. There is, he is the one, as Isaiah reminds us, who makes, you know, who raises up kings and and puts them down. And Psalm 143 reminds us of put no confidence in princes.

And I think there is, we can often be so, so focused on the next election. And to think if we just win this election, then, you know, things are going to be okay. If we don't win this election, things are going to fall apart.

And I think we remember that even going back to the Noeic Covenant, God has actually promised through his common grace that he will sustain this world doesn't mean things are always going to be good. But we know that Christ wants his church all over this world. He doesn't just want it, just want his church in, you know, in places that have good functioning governments or healthy economies, he wants them in places with bad governments and weak economies.

And so we're simply called to be faithful in our, in our various vocations. And we trust that the Lord is going to continue to do his work and continue to promote his gospel as good news, as good news for people suffering under injustice and oppression. Yeah, no, that's a good word.

And we believe in ordered loves. So a love of country is a good thing. A love of politics can be a good thing, but they need to be ordered and they need to be sub ordered.

And we are often getting those orders wrong. And the the Bible has very much, the New Testament is very much a church centric view of what's happening in the world. And the the Westminster standards do to talk about we want this, this wider kingdom, not kingdom, but this wider purview to be as you said from 1 Timothy 2, the kind of place in which the main event, the main event going on in the world is not America.

It's not Western civilization. It's the Church of Jesus Christ, which exists in those things. And so we care about them.

But I think your book can go a long way toward helping getting that order correct. So once again, Dave and Drune in politics after Christendom political theology in the fractured world published by Zonder Van Academic, I think 2020, do check out the book. Thank you for being here.

Thank you for listening to life and books and everything. A ministry of clearly reformed, you can get episodes like this and other resources at clearlyreform.org. Until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.