

This review by Paul Lusk of three titles appeared under the title **Christians in the Political Arena?** in *Evangelicals Now* in September 2007

*TALES OF TWO CITIES: Christianity and Politics*

Ed. by Stephen Clark

IVP/Affinity.

294 pages. £14.99. ISBN 978-1-84474-096-3

*FAITH AND POLITICS AFTER CHRISTENDOM: The Church as a Movement for Anarchy*

By Jonathan Bartley

Paternoster Press.

234 pages. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-84227-348-7

*JESUS AND POLITICS: Confronting the Powers*

By Alan Storkey

Baker Academic.

336 pages £11.12 (Amazon) ISBN 0-80102-784-5

What is the place of the Christian 'faith community' in modern political life? It is a question that troubles believers and sceptics alike.

Some church leaders fear that 'secular humanism' threatens religious liberty, so they call on evangelicals to re-engage in politics. Others are alarmed at the militant 'religious right' and the grip it has taken on America, today's only superpower.

*Tales of Two Cities* claims to offer a new way forward. It is a collection edited by Stephen Clark from seven presentations made to a conference organised by the Affinity grouping of evangelical churches in 2005. The introduction — by Affinity's founder and president, Jonathan Stephen — asks us to reject two familiar choices: either trying to revive the corpse of the 'Christian nation', or abandoning public life and leaving the world to suffer the consequences. He wants to build a new consensus among Christians on politics. Can he succeed?

Professor Gordon Wenham gets the quest off to a lively start, arguing that biblical law is a 'compromise between the moral ideals of the Old Testament and the free-for-all that prevailed before the flood'. This compromise is based partly on cultural practices and partly on the readiness of any society to accept a 'high moral tone.' From this he derives a political programme from Genesis and what he claims are 'five major principles that should govern human society': fertile marriage; capital punishment for murder; environmentalism; vegetarianism; and Sabbath observance. This astounding opening left me with mixed feelings — Wenham is bold and original and the first Wenhamite party broadcast will cause quite a stir; but the application of OT law seems subjective and even whimsical, and offers no space for democratic debate once the authoritative interpretation of law has been determined.

Next, Steve Wilmschurst follows the Mennonite thinker John Howard Yoder in finding a direct political message in Jesus: Christians are to bring about a real, material kingdom on earth with an 'unprecedented alternative politics' based on justice, community, peace and service. The church does this by creating 'independent political space' — not by controlling states. Christians are called to form political movements that reject nationalism, violence and coercion and are 'indifferent to authority'. Wilmschurst is in a familiar tradition of Christian pacifism and anarchism, and for the underlying scriptural arguments has little to add to the mighty Yoder. In a book that claims contemporary relevance, I am surprised that Steve Wilmschurst does not try more to relate this tradition to current debates over (for example) the market economy and human rights.

In the third and longest chapter, David Field explains the Presbyterian covenantal position of Samuel Rutherford. Rutherford was a theocrat; the state applies the law of God or else it is a tyranny. Field's study is not uninteresting but he fails to consider the key question that Rutherford has always raised for Christian politics: if Godless (in today's context, secular) government is tyranny, at what point should the church use illegal or even violent means to overthrow it? This question formed the centrepiece of Francis Schaeffer's influential **Christian Manifesto**, and it is surprising that Field ignores this issue, instead concluding with an attack on pluralism and tolerance in politics. This assault sets the scene for the key debate in the book.

First, a short interlude allows David W. Smith to introduce Edward Miall, a Victorian evangelical who believed the church was infused with the 'trade spirit' of the rising middle class and alienated the urban poor from the gospel. Voluntary effort alone could not counter the appalling conditions of inner cities in the mid-19th century — Christians must engage politically. Miall was also an anti-colonial champion of racial equality. I would have been interested to know how Miall related to the rise of Christian socialism.

The fifth chapter brings in Paul Helm to argue for pluralism in politics. Christianity does not demand 'uniformitarian' politics nor does it seek special political privileges for its followers. Pluralists see the state's job as protecting liberty of expression in a diverse society. On both theological and practical grounds, this is the best position for today's Christians to take. Professor Helm explains that political pluralism should not be confused with theological relativism. Pluralism upholds peace and civil order despite sharp disagreements in matters of conscience and faith. If all religions amount to the same thing, and no one cares what is true, pluralism (in politics) is unnecessary.

David McKay now weighs in with 'the crown rights of Jesus today'. Like David Field, Professor McKay uses the witness of the classical Presbyterian writers to demand that Christians should be in the business of creating Christian government based on OT law. He spends some time ruminating on what this might mean in practice, without coming to any answer, but does acknowledge the practical and theoretical difficulties. Like Field, he is clearer about what he is against than what he is for: Christians, he says, 'cannot accept pluralism as social philosophy' since a 'neutral' state will tend to 'a secular humanist agenda' where 'the assertion of Christ's authority becomes muted'. Pluralistic politics is, he fears, 'often coupled with a relativistic view of truth'. Clearly this attack is directed at poor Paul Helm, sandwiched down to 26 pages between Field and McKay, their 120 pages repeating the cry: Calvinist theocracy good, democratic pluralism bad. A pluralist constitution, says Field, will say that, 'everyone is right and no one is right and none of us can ever know'. As Helm boarded his plane back to Canada, he must have reflected sadly at this insulting claim. A pluralist constitution says the state's job is to preserve order so human beings can pursue their God-given opportunity to figure things out for themselves: the state should not be in the business of telling citizens (including Christians) what is right and wrong.

After six rounds, *Tales of Two Cities* scores: three for the religious right, with Wenham, Field and McKay advocating a state governed by (variable) interpretations of Mosaic law; two for the Christian left, with Wilmhust and Smith for social justice and equality with NT roots; and one, Helm, for a pluralistic state not taking sides in matters of faith. Now Stephen Clark arrives with the concluding chapter. What will he make of the battles that lie behind him?

He starts with arguments against the theocratic right. OT law should be read within progressive revelation of God's person, not as an overarching political ideal. Criminal law is about managing behaviour, not judging sin. Christian politicians are needed to bring honest solutions to practical problems, not achieve a sacred state or a Christian nation. But he ends by conceding that

the state is instituted by God with an ultimate duty to determine what is good and this overrides the case for liberty of conscience. Clark argues for a 'Christian pragmatism' in defending 'moral landmarks'. These are laws belonging to a 'Christian heritage with which some nations have been privileged' and they help keep public opinion sympathetic to Christianity. Clark does not give any example of what these 'landmark' laws are — does he mean the established church, blasphemy laws, monogamous marriage or what? He thinks Christians should defend these as some kind of cultural legacy from past centuries, and then expect 'public opinion' to view Christians positively on this basis. This strikes me as strained. It brings us back to a position that Jonathan Stephen criticises in his introduction — where 'with mounting desperation, Christians are being mobilised to defend the crumbling foundation of a society founded and developed on Christian beliefs'. Affinity seems in the end to decide that there is, after all, no alternative to nostalgia, no option but to live the myth of a Christian nation.

Jonathan Bartley was once an enthusiastic young Conservative working for John Major in the party's post-Thatcher civil wars. An earlier book recorded his disillusion with the Tories. He now identifies himself as a pacifist with anarchist leanings, though still an evangelical Anglican. He runs a Christian 'think tank' and is a regular media pundit. His book *Faith and Politics after Christendom* lures readers with the provocative subtitle: 'The Church as a movement for anarchy'. It is written with clarity and pace and provides a useful resume of the wide range of political actions which some Christians take part in. But it fails to deliver on its promise. Bartley does not seriously argue that the church should seek the abolition of government. What he means by 'for anarchy' is this: in the old days of 'Christendom' the so-called church was an official institution at the centre of political power, but now in 'post-Christendom' it can play a role 'from the margins' on what is sometimes called a 'bottom up' model of political influence. Bartley's own preference would be for a leftish stance in favour of equality and social justice with a strong pacifist tinge, but he does not develop scriptural arguments to show why Christians should share this view. So Bartley's church turns out to be neither 'for anarchy' nor really a political 'movement'.

Dr. Alan Storkey served for many years as chair of the now-defunct Movement for Christian Democracy. He is in no doubt that the church should be a political movement. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are 'political strategies' and conversion to be a follower of Jesus is 'the deepest political act' requiring obedience to God as a 'political response'. Christians should form a political party with Jesus, the uniquely good politician, at its head. Christians who support other parties have 'absorbed secular culture' which has affected their 'empty minds'. Dr. Storkey has stood more than once for Parliament, for the 'Christian party' or as a 'Christian democrat'. Maybe this experience has made him bitter about democratic elections, which he denounces as 'beauty parades' where 'lies' are 'fed to mindless gumps'. Dr. Storkey's vision — a theocratic society where church, state and family live under the direct rule of God — is close to the Calvinist ideal at the far end of the religious-right; but he rejects OT legalism and is well to the left on issues of economy, welfare, environment and human rights. In his deeply personal vision, all shades of Christianity, and political views ranging from authoritarian to anarchist, can be melded together once people understand the real political claims of Christ. The underlying thought is complex and the difficulties that many Christians would find with the analysis and historical interpretation are dismissed with some casualness. I am surprised that Bishop Tom Wright endorses this book as a good starting point for those wanting to understand the relationship between church and state.

So where should Christians look to build an understanding of today's debates about faith and politics? Schaeffer's 1981 *Christian Manifesto* is foundational for the moderate religious right and Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* (1972) likewise for the pacifist left: both are readable, well argued and still in print. David Holloway's *Church and State in the new Millennium* (2000), no longer in print, applies Schaeffer's case to the British situation.

I would especially recommend Leonard Verduin's great 1964 classic *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* — still available from the Metropolitan Tabernacle bookshop. Verduin shows how the Reformation clash between Calvinism and Anabaptism helped shape modern politics. From Verduin we learn that a free, pluralistic society has roots in the quest of a believing church to regulate its own membership.

Those who hanker after the Calvinist model of a Christianised society must confront this case against them. Those who fear that modern democratic politics leaves Christians outside should read Verduin, and be encouraged that the liberty of the Christian church and the liberty of the secular nation belong inseparably to a heritage of evangelical faithfulness.