

Sermon follow-up  
1/20/08  
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Psalm 98 is the center of Book 4 of the Psalter. The structure of Book 4 as a whole (Psalms 90-106) is chiasmic. Psalm 98 highlights the theme of Book 4, namely, God's coming as King.

Psalm 98 itself is a chiasm, celebrating the arrival of the King *with musical instruments* (cf. 2 Sam. 6; Rev. 4-5). For more on structure (both Book 4 in general and Psalm 98 in particular), see Jim Jordan's essay "The Fourth Book of the Psalter" in *Christendom Essays*.

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The progression of Psalm 98 from Israel to the nations to the whole creation is a common pattern in both the Psalms and prophets. Indeed, it shows up in some other places more clearly than it does in Psalm 98. These layers, or concentric circles, reflect God's pattern in redemptive history and in culture.

The final section refers to the sea, world, rivers, and hills. It possible to read this as a further reference to the Gentiles (e.g., the Gentiles nations are frequently symbolized by the sea). But I think even if that is a layer of the meaning, it still makes sense to view it as depicting the creation itself rejoicing in God's kingship. The curse that fell on creation will ultimately give way to blessing. The physical creation will last forever, albeit in a transfigured state (analogous to the resurrection of human bodies).

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One of the best discussions of the normal war/holy war distinction is found in Peter Leithart's *The Kingdom and the Power*, 11ff. Leithart's book also has good some thoughts on the way kingdom of God relates to politics, particularly 210, 214, 216.

With Leithart, I want to point out that Christians certainly should make use of the weapons of "normal war." For many Christians (e.g., those called into politics or media/journalism), "normal war" will be central to their vocation. But we should always remember and practice the "primacy of holy war."

As a matter of strategy, we need to focus on [1] the church as the *polis* of God, an alternative and transcendent nation and kingdom; [2] the primacy of liturgy, prayer, and mercy in cultural transformation; and finally [3] direct political involvement as a Christian duty (though how that works out varies depending on our specific callings and cultural situation).

I am certainly supportive of Christians who pursue biblically-shaped political involvement via the means of "normal war," even if it only amounts to putting the brakes on our cultural decline while we pray and work for a wider reformation in other ways. Christian engagement with the American political process is both a privilege and a

responsibility and we dare not neglect it.

I would also add that a lot of the evangelical, conservative political agenda falls flat if it's not wedded to mercy ministry of some sort. It does no good to complain about government welfare or education unless we are ready (as local churches) to foot the bill for alternatives. Besides, practicing mercy adds creditability to everything else we do as a church. I am NOT saying bringing aid to people is a means to an end -- obviously we want to help the poor because they are made in God's image and we are called them to love them as our neighbors. But there are a lot of collateral benefits that come with an effective mercy ministry program. The overall impact of the church on the culture is intensified.

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Any time Christians get involved in politics, the dangers of “triumphalism” lurk. We need to be very careful about using God’s name or Word to endorse our own political ideals. Certainly, we want our political agenda to be shaped by the Bible, but on many, many issues, we are left to biblically informed prudence (a.k.a. “sanctified common sense”). The “biblical position” on many political issues will not be clear cut and godly folk may disagree. Unfortunately, many evangelicals who have gotten involved in politics have blithely assumed that their conservative agenda is more biblically grounded than it really is. We need to do a lot more reflection on political content of the Bible (Vern Poythress’ *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* is a good place to start). We need to be very reluctant to put a “Thus saith the Lord” behind particular pieces of legislation.

There is a kind of political triumphalism that really reduces to pride. Christians can and must be triumphalistic – but our triumphalism is rooted in the gospel, not anything we can do in ourselves. It is rooted in Christ’s victory, not anything we accomplish politically. It is a victory that comes through Spiritual means (especially the spoken word, water, bread, and wine) Our problem has largely been one of misplaced confidence – we have trusted in princes and political parties, rather than employing the means God has given us for world transformation. We must remember that in the Bible, victories are won through faithful suffering. If want to change the world, we must be prepared to serve and to suffer.

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Can the “weapons of holy war” really get the job done? Can we really charge the gates of hell with hymn books in hand and expect to win? Can we overcome the gates of hell with nothing more than preaching, sacraments, and service?

The early church is a helpful model here. They had very little access to the means of “normal war.” There was no culture war to speak of because they were almost completely marginalized. Or, to the extent there was a culture war, they were powerless to win it from it a worldly perspective.

But through faithful worship and service they were able to conquer the Roman Empire in a short amount of time. This is a helpful reminder: No society is impervious to the gospel, provided our proclamation is wedded to lives of faithfulness.

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The fact that instruments come at the center of the chiasm in Psalm 98 is significant. As C. S. Lewis said, Hebrew worship was full of “gusto.” It was loud and noisy and vibrant. How much more should this be the case now that the kingdom has come in so much more fullness in Christ?

While biblical worship will run the gamut of emotions, from contrition to celebration, the overall tone will be one of triumph. Why? Because the King has come, the kingdom has arrived, and the victory has been won!