

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Common Grace and Natural Law in Washington, D.C.

In a recent trip to Washington, D.C., I met with a group of highly influential Christians involved in public policy, including lobbyists, lawyers in the Justice Department, and presidential appointees.

To a person, they voiced two things: a clear sense of calling to their role, and a strong frustration that other followers of Christ were clueless – even critical - about how they were pursuing that calling. To some, the only appropriate way to be a Christian in Washington is to share Christ on every elevator, make speeches littered with Scripture on the congressional floor, and insist on biblical language in every policy. Instead, these Christians expressed a desire for fellow believers to understand how their calling is unique, specifically in how it is rooted in the dynamics of common grace, finding its most effective expression in the appeal to natural law.

These are critical ideas for the engagement of culture, but often misunderstood – or even more often, never even considered.

Common grace is that grace which is extended to all human beings through God's general providence (see Mt. 5:45, Heb. 1:2-3, Jn. 1:1-4). For example, consider the nurture of rain and sun, and the resulting bounty of a harvest. This is not to be confused with prevenient grace which affords individuals the ability to respond to God's call for salvation, the nature and extent of which divides Calvinists and Arminians to this day (on the confusion of common and prevenient grace, see Roger Olson's magnificent new work, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, which serves both sides of this classic debate with sorely needed fairness, charity and understanding). Instead, common grace, wrote the late Stanley Grenz, "speaks of God's extension of favor to all people through providential care, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge and love God."

And what has this to do with Christians in Washington?

In his excellent article on grace in the second edition of the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes writes that "common grace is evident in the divine government or control of human society. It is true that human society is in a state of sinful fallenness. Were it not for the restraining hand of God, indeed, our world would long since have degenerated into a self-destructive chaos of iniquity, in which social order and community life would have been an impossibility" (p. 519). For those who attempt to honor Christ within the Beltway, it is the active

participation in, and working for, the extension of common grace that fills their waking hours. And we should be glad for such commitment. As Charles Colson has written, "Understanding Christianity as a worldview is important not only for fulfilling the great commission but also for fulfilling the cultural commission – the call to create a culture under the lordship of Christ. God cares not only about redeeming souls but also about restoring his creation. He calls us to be agents not only of his saving grace but also of his common grace. Our job is not only to build up the church but also to build a society to the glory of God."

And on what basis do they pursue this "common" grace? Most often through an appeal to natural law.

Natural law is law that is natural, such as the law of gravity, the principles of which can be found in nature itself. For those Christians engaged in public policy, natural law provides the basis upon which an appeal to conscience about the "good" (and the "evil") can be made. It is how a Christian in a secular setting can make an appeal to what is "right" among those who do not share a conviction that biblical revelation is a truth-source, yet still allow that Christian to lead people *to* that truth-source. The appeal to natural law provided the foundation for the moral philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, and with important modifications, was employed by Luther and Calvin. More recently, the arguments of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* made ample use of this idea, as well as the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, Jr., specifically in his famed *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

So rather than finding a model in Peter speaking to the God-fearing Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2), those in Washington find a clearer model for their vocation in Joseph, Daniel, or Esther. Such figures served public policy in very secular settings, and we honor the contribution of their lives and their role in Kingdom history to this day. It is no less decisive for us to bestow the same honor – and support - for the men and women filling similar roles now. They work within a system in obedience to God, and through that obedience, affect the system for God.

And for the rest of us as well.

James Emery White

Sources

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