

Book Review

Timothy Sherratt.

Power Made Perfect?

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016.

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Timothy Sherratt is a professor of Political Science at Gordon College in Wenham, MA. His book engages one of the most pressing issues facing American Christians today, “How can Christians engage in the political process that is both faithful to Christ and respectful of pluralism?” Stated another way, “How can Christians influence the political process without selling out their values or seeking to impose theocratic rule?”

Sherratt does not answer these big questions directly. Instead, he takes a heuristic approach to encourage his readers to think more deeply about the complexity of the questions. Then, on occasion, he provides some personal some personal opinions, In the end, the overall thrust of the book is to illuminate rather than resolve.

Sherratt begins helping his readers reflect on interaction between faith and politics by describing how the Christian Right in the United States and the Christian Democratic Union in Germany integrated politics and faith. He explains how these contemporary political movements were influenced by their historical setting and social values as they sought to embody Christian principles in the political arena. Sherratt does not argue that these two movements are the best examples of Christian political activity. He simply believes, and I think correctly, that they are illustrative and therefore heuristically useful in helping readers think about how faith and politics should interact.

With readers struggling to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the political movements mentioned above, Sherratt turns to Christian theology for principles to guide Christian political activity. He argues that two concepts provide the bedrock for our behavior. First, since Christ is risen, Christian ethics are tied to the realm of the miraculous. Sherratt writes, “Christ is risen, so, love your enemies (p. 29 italics his).” The corollary of the resurrection is that power is made perfect in weakness. Christian power comes from service, just as Christ ruled by serving. The second element, Christ is king, requires Christians to believe and act as if God is ruler over all. Sherratt contends that the Christian’s ultimate allegiance is to Christ and that Christ’s authority governs all our actions, not just those tied to our spiritual life and evangelism.

With this theological framework in hand, Sherratt outlines the principles of how faith impacts politics using the framework of Abraham Kuyper’s “sphere sovereignty.” Sherratt argues that individual and social virtues are essential to the smooth workings of the institutions of family, Church, and state. But Christians must also recognize that all our institutions are fallen and under the curse of sin. So like Reinhold Niebuhr, Christians must use the idealism of the Church to critique the political status quo and its institutions, but by the same token Christians must recognize that sin pervades all and thus we can never achieve

perfect politics until Christ comes. The beauty of this section lies in the way Sherratt explains how elements of the American political system thwart or resist discussion and implementation of activities that benefit the common good.

But how should a Christian apply sphere sovereignty principles in the modern age? Sherratt takes up four controversial topics, immigration, education, abortion, and gay marriage, to illustrate how Christians can implement faith and politics in a responsible manner. Unfortunately, Sherratt's comments often are more probative than directive, more explanatory than declarative. When he does recommend a specific political policy (e.g. conceding gay marriage p. 87), he seems to fall more in line with political expediency than with biblical teaching. I think he is correct to admonish readers (presumably Christian readers) that recent legal decisions shouldn't be seen as the sky is falling as often there is a backlash or a correction against major legal or legislative decisions. But I found his comments to be a bit tone deaf concerning the significance of gay marriage being another landmark in America's continued slide toward Gomorrah.

Sherratt concludes with a call to optimism. He predicts that Christians will take advantage of the opportunities provided by non-governmental organizations to impact their world. In this way, they can act for the public good without the baggage of American hegemony. Likewise, Christians can use their efforts in social justice and education as a pathway to dialogue with and influence government. I think he is correct on both accounts and Christians should strongly consider this approach. He exhorts Christians to actively participate in the church and avoid, what the sectarian impulse that can divide us in arbitrary ways. He calls readers to embody the faith in practice and lifestyle.

EVALUATION

American Christians interested in integrating their faith with politics will benefit from reading this book. Sherratt's summary of the history of religion and politics in the United States is worth the price of the book on its own. In addition, I think his discussion of the complexities of the issues rightly encourages humility amongst readers particularly when thinking about those who proffer policies with which they disagree. I appreciated Sherratt's desire to be faithful to the biblical witness in wanting to live out his political activities under the Lordship of Christ.

Unfortunately, I think Sherratt did not think deeply enough about what the Bible teaches. For example on page 33, he describes God's work in the world as being characterized by service, suffering, sacrifice, humility, hospitality,... While true, it is also an unfortunate simplification of the biblical testimony. For example, would the Pharaoh of the Exodus have agreed to this characterization of God? Likewise I think he fell for the common error of confusing ethics within the Church (sacrificial giving to each other) with those ethics Christians are to use in the world (Luke 3:14; Rom 13). For example, his argument that Christians should lobby for welfare assistance for single mothers with the same energy as they do against abortion fails to account for this distinction (cf. p. 84). Such suggestions, to me, suggests a sort of saccharin Samaritanism where instead of paying the inn keeper to care for the robbed man, the Good Samaritan orders the inn keeper to spend his own money (cf. Luke 10). Shouldn't the church be helping the single mother? It seems to me that the role of the state should be to compel families to care for their own families rather than requiring other families to care for them. The state is under no obligation to parent its

citizens but it is required to protect the lives of its citizens from being killed unjustly as is done in abortion.

From a political perspective, I think Sherratt gave lip service to the notion that Scripture can countenance a range of political frameworks because he not only kept suggesting for policies reminiscent of the welfare state of western Europe but also argued for changing our election process from winner take all to proportional representation. It would have been more helpful to discuss how Christians can influence our politics in the present system rather than suggesting it be reconfigured in such a dramatic way. I would argue that the present gridlock in the U.S. government is a good thing, not the best thing but certainly better than where the “progressives” wish to take us. Gridlock means that our country has not reached sufficient unity to move legislation. One could also argue that there is too much agreement in government to spend wantonly given our present deficit and national debt.

Despite these weaknesses, I think the book is helpful in laying out the issues and difficulties facing the integration of faith and politics for the American Christian. Readers seeking to have their prejudices rattled will find much to jostle them in this book. Unfortunately, if you are looking for answers, you will have to look elsewhere.

