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### 2018: Political Discipleship in Review

Vince Bacote

**Vincent Bacote** is Associate Professor of Theology at Wheaton College and a Fellow with the Center for Public Justice.

A disciple of Jesus is always on the path of a learner; there is no exception when it comes to political life. Among the many resources available to guide those on this path are [Five Views on The Church and Politics](#) edited by Amy Black, [Why Liberalism Failed](#) by Patrick Deneen, [Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump](#) by John Fea and [Introduction to Political Science](#) by Fred Van Geest. These very different books are particularly helpful for directing our attention to multiple aspects of political discipleship.

We can think of this as a matter of attention to context. It is important to consider both the historical contexts in which Christian traditions emerged as well as important influences in our current context (especially if we might be unaware of some of the prominent factors involved *back then* and *now*). It sometimes appears that Christians regard their faith as either strictly contemporary or as a direct and clear version of the faith as given in the first century. However, the truth is that our various traditions have emerged across history and often in response to challenges or conflicts. Alternatively, sometimes Christians have a very selective memory about the past and fail to reckon with the complex “back story” of their faith tradition.

This is where the [Five Views](#) book can be helpful, as Amy Black has curated a volume that presents the stories of a range of faith traditions with attention to their political perspectives. The introduction and conclusion provide helpful framing, and the five contributors come from Anabaptist, Lutheran, Black Church, Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions with each chapter containing responses from the other authors. The Fea text is also helpful in its focus on the conservative Protestant ecumenism that comprises the evangelical tradition. These all have distinct points of emphasis, some more prominently in areas of doctrine and others in postures of engagement with political life. Even when one is unwilling to wear the colors of another tradition, there are insights that can be gleaned from each as we pursue the path of political discipleship.

The Anabaptist tradition presents a perpetual challenge to Christians regarding their ultimate loyalty. This tradition is perhaps most familiar to us in Mennonite and Brethren denominations. It is often

known for its emphasis on a distinctive community life and general resistance to political engagement within the structures of government, an emphasis that proved very costly, as many adherents faced opposition from Reformers. Examples include Zwingli and Luther; a number of Anabaptists faced execution. Thomas W. Heilke's presentation of the Anabaptist tradition includes an intriguing example of creativity and humble service during the era of the second world war, when Anabaptists and other peace churches urged the government toward an alternative to military conscription. The Civilian Public Service was a government response to these conscientious objectors, and the Anabaptist witness in the various domains of service proved to be a notable public witness. As I read about this I wondered about the limits of my creativity for political engagement rooted in ultimate fidelity to Christ.

The Lutheran tradition was never intended to be more than a reform within the Roman Catholic church and is not hostile to politics. However, in fact, Luther needed the protection of princes after he was excommunicated in 1521 – his “reforms” were not welcomed by Rome. Since the time of Luther, this tradition has had a strong emphasis on the distinction between the Gospel that saves us and the law that restrains sin and leads to repentance. The Lutheran focus on two kingdoms (the church is the domain of the Gospel and the world is the domain of law). Our justification by grace alone apart from works creates a disposition where one might have an antenna highly sensitive to ways the temptation to confuse the two kingdoms may emerge. Especially, this happens with attempts to force the Gospel into the political domain (forgetting the centrality of the cross) or human efforts to build utopias that appear to “save” the world. The Lutheran tradition as presented by Robert Benne is allergic to attempts to Christianize the political domain, and it urges us to make sure we do not lose the distinctiveness of the Gospel. While this allergic response can sometimes be a challenge when “Gospel” becomes reason for political restraint (restraint those from other traditions might find debatable or unnecessary), we should always seek to be clear about the meaning and scope of the Gospel while discerning what it means to be “Gospel people” in public life.

James K.A. Smith presents a version of the Reformed tradition that is often associated with Dutch Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and reflects the posture of the Center for Public Justice (it is important to note that there are types of Reformed theology, including approaches to political life). Smith reminds us that Calvin and other early figures in the Reformed tradition resisted and countered the two-tiered sacred/secular arrangement that emerged in medieval Roman Catholicism, emphasizing the all of life is *Coram Deo*, or before the face of God. If all of life is before God, then politics is an important sphere of specifically Christian action. This language could make Anabaptists fear the specter of Constantinianism, and Lutherans and members of Black Church traditions may wonder how to avoid triumphalisms that diminish our ecclesiology or produce horrors like apartheid. These concerns are important, but Smith points out that the best of the tradition is informed by an eschatology sensitive to the “not yet” of God's kingdom that resists establishing the kingdom, even while it encourages followers of Jesus to provide glimpses of what is to come.

The Black church tradition, forged in suffering, is an example of Christian faith when survival is at stake. Bruce Fields of Trinity International University helps us see that the common experience of slavery and Jim Crow did not diminish denominational differences. Rather, it yielded a common and complicated engagement with the government of a nation that saw itself as “Christian” while actively resisting the flourishing of those with African heritage. There is less a specific set of core doctrines, though a hopeful eschatology runs through the various versions of Black church life. Christian political engagement was and has been a necessity because of the centrality of the church for all of the

dimensions of life for Black Americans (because of injustices and little to no access to other social or political institutions - this is very clear post-emancipation). This meant in part seeking ways to urge the government to provide protections from discrimination and opportunities for full participation in society. While recent (since the 1960s) historical developments have yielded some improvements, the Black church tradition generally remains oriented to the pursuit of a whole life flourishing and serves as witness to what can be accomplished for the benefit of all persons. This tradition leads us to consider the ways Christians can be complicit in social and political hostility toward fellow believers, as well as the hopeful resilience that can characterize those who suffer, resist and sometimes flourish amid opposition.

The social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has a long history, and J. Brian Benested's contribution to this volume (and the Van Heest text) directs us to the emphases such as the dignity of the human person, our solidarity with the human family and care for God's creation. While this tradition has foundational documents going back to 1891, it goes back at least as far as Augustine's teaching on virtue and Aquinas' teaching on the forms of justice. The latter includes making the case for using the law to provide moral education. Besides being the oldest of all these traditions, one major difference between this position and all the others is its emphasis on forms of natural law that presume a degree of common understanding between humans inside and outside the church. This view entails approaches to political engagement where the possibility of persuading others (even in a pluralistic society) is a real possibility. Most Protestants come from traditions that are less optimistic about such persuasion. Even so, we should always ask ourselves about what difference it could make if we practice commitments to pursue the genuine common good of all persons and solidarity with fellow humans, especially those marginalized by society. What do our actions "say" to others when we display a commitment to their good, especially if they oppose us?

Messiah College history professor John Fea's [\*Believe Me\*](#) emerges out of a concern about the latest example of white evangelical Christian political playbook that contributed to the election of President Trump. In contrast to a common good emphasis, Fea says the playbook "too often gravitates toward nativism, xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and an unbiblical view of American exceptionalism" (7). One could make the argument that the book explores how political discipleship can go wrong, even if one has good intentions (though such intentions may be disconnected from the kinds of theological reasoning seen in [\*Five Views\*](#)). Access to power is among the greatest challenges and temptations when one wishes to achieve political change; Fea uses the label "court evangelicals" to describe figures like Jerry Falwell, Jr., Paula White and Robert Jeffress, all of whom were early supporters of Trump and who remain as part of circle of advisors. While acknowledging that not all of them unequivocally support the President, Fea observes that many court evangelicals are making the risky calculation of gaining access and some influence while they could get burned in ways similar to Billy Graham (with Nixon) and David Kuo (in the George W. Bush White House). Fea is not against evangelical political engagement but worries about the negative impact of being "in the court" as one power broker among others. The stewardship of power at any level is a great responsibility. Political discipleship at its best neither avoids nor worships power, while maintaining a keen awareness of the potential for intoxication and corruption when it is in our hands.

Political discipleship involves serious consideration of dimensions of our history and recognition of influences that are in plain sight, but often unrecognized. Fea, a historian, would encourage us to look back at the trajectory of the evangelical political ethos going back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, particularly in terms of the role played by fear. While there was a strong desire of the leaders to

demonstrate that their new community was approved by God, it is “the story of a group of Bible-believers who lived in fear of what a wrathful God might do to them if they failed to keep their society pure” (80). This desire was expressed with a zealousness that went to the extremes in social/political enforcement and over the history of the country viewed witches, Native Americans, Catholics, infidels, violent/rebellious slaves, modernists and various “others” (such as Muslims) as threats to the Christian identity of the nation. Fea acknowledges that sometimes there are legitimate reasons for fears, but he wants to encourage readers toward faithful political engagement that leads with hope.

Deneen’s volume importantly highlights what is both invisible yet all about us: the effects of the liberalism that is like the oxygen of our social order. This “liberalism” is one of the fruits of the Enlightenment, the sociopolitical basis for our approach to life in the West. The spectrum from left to right represents approaches to best achieving the *liberty* of persons with all of its benefits. Deneen argues our language of individual rights and the exalted status of personal preference has led to a triumph, but with results that have yielded tremendous inequality and the opposite of a society of freedom and happiness for most if not all people (the triumph of liberalism, in Deneen’s telling, includes an expansive state that facilitates and polices the aims of liberalism, whether it appears more like the freedom of the market or of sexual expression). Liberalism has achieved “freedom from” family, institutions, place and given identities; the individual is the subject and tool of the system, instead of the administrator thereof. An important question of political discipleship in this moment is this: how readily do we simply assume that the liberal sociopolitical order is to be taken for granted? How often do we ask if the anthropology of liberalism holds greater sway within us than a view of our humanity, informed by Christian formation? Deneen proposes a response that sounds a bit like Rod Dreher’s [\*Benedict Option\*](#), the pursuit of communal practices that deepen connections with institutions like family and church within intentional communities. This could slowly help facilitate a truer experience of liberty in opposition to the ironic slavery of liberalism. While I have my concerns with both Dreher and Deneen on this point, it does lead one to wonder whether the challenges of modern liberalism present an opportunity to learn from the deep community life characteristic of Anabaptists.

Bethel University professor Fred Van Geest’s volume is a textbook that takes us outside of a focus on political life within the United States, though his own commitments will resonate with friends of CPJ. While political discipleship does not require mastery of political science, exposure to this book helps us see the complex history and present of forms of political order around the world. Among the many diagrams and charts, there is one chart (72) that includes the word “anocracy”. Anocracies are regimes with a mixture of democracy and autocracy, and the chart reveals most people live under this kind of government. This directs our attention to the truth that many Christians live in political environments where their practice of political discipleship will be very different. When we have our conversations about politics, how often are we presuming the normalcy of the liberal political order and a form of democracy that allows citizens to contribute to and participate in the process of government? Our recognition that Christians live in multiple political contexts ought to cultivate within us a type of humility when we are tempted to make normative judgments about what Christians “ought” to do politically. Perhaps one of the chief character traits of political discipleship should be humility, even as we seek to be creative in our faithfulness in any context.

Where do these volumes lead us in this time of vexation and distress? These books help us see the complexities involved in faithful Christian discipleship in the political realm. They show us that we need to proceed with enthusiasm tempered by humility, aware that we peer through a glass darkly as

we sort through perennial and contemporary challenges of politics. At least in the United States, avoidance, apathy and cynicism should not be on the table. A willingness to learn from the broad tradition and from the highs and lows of Christian history can help us think, speak and act in ways that honor God and genuinely seek the common good. As a perusal of the approach of CPJ will reveal, political discipleship can be pursued while taking seriously the perpetual challenges to equipping citizens to have deep convictions – while seeking the formation of public that respects a plurality of political worldviews. The books in this review help us to see that diversity within and beyond the Christian tradition. Each volume can help equip us to be disciples whose proclamation and practice reflects an appreciation of the opportunities of political engagement, while maintaining an ultimate hope in God rather than politics itself. Worshipping God above all, with politics as one dimension of our faithful practice, remains an opportunity and aspiration for us.

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