

Editorial | *Protestant Social Thought*

The recent promulgation of the social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) by Pope Benedict XVI brings to the fore a host of critical issues confronting all Christians and people of good will in the struggle to address the economy, the defense of life, the promotion of truth, and the witness of love in the pursuit of integral human development. For sympathetic Protestant and evangelical observers of Catholic social doctrine, it also raises the issue of the ongoing need for theological definition and cultural engagement by Protestant and evangelical writers of the concerns that the pope touches on in *Caritas in Veritate*. There is a problem, however, and it is systemic in nature. Neither magisterial Protestants nor evangelicals have a theologically unified body of social teaching.

As you may already be aware, Protestant social thought is a vibrant field that, on the one hand, is ever expanding and alert to emerging issues, but it is also, on the other hand, a field that lacks fundamental definition, systematic rigor, and coherence among its various branches. The distinguished Protestant ethicist James Gustafson once described the state of Protestant social thought as “only a little short of chaos.” Roman Catholic commentators have also pointed out that Protestant social thought operates without an ecclesial magisterium wherein disparate ideas, goals, definitions, and theological affirmations are honed into a body of authoritative social teaching. The question of *how* to build such a body of Protestant social doctrine is one concern, but the issue of *whether* it is even possible to do so within the decentralized strictures of Protestant theology is entirely another.

In recent decades, Protestant and evangelical writers have been active in developing what might be more aptly titled political theology, but it has often remained disconnected from the fundamental theological disciplines of moral theology and/or ethics and systematic theology. Thus, when I urge that Protestant theologians need to build a body of social thought, what I mean is that the first order of business is to settle on a theological infrastructure before attempting to resolve specific social questions.

In his older book *Politics and the Biblical Drama*, Richard Mouw points out that the themes of political theology and cultural engagement have been greeted with varying degrees of enthusiasm in the Protestant and evangelical communities. He observes that there are some who insist that the label itself is based on a confused understanding of the proper scope of theology.

In Mouw's opinion, it is easy to sympathize with some of the criticisms that have been lodged against political theology. Distinguished evangelical theologian Carl Henry is an outspoken critic of political theology and according to Mouw, Henry is correct in complaining that writings using this label are often man-centered and closely aligned with Marxist and socialist ideologies. Henry, though, is less convincing when he suggests that "it is unclear how much of this political emphasis is properly designated theology, in view of the primary concern of theology with the knowledge of God." For similar reasons, Henry is also a critic of natural-law theories.

Henry's objection goes much further than a mere complaint about what so-called political theologians do; he is suggesting that the very juxtaposition of the terms *political* and *theology* is a mismatch. To counter Henry's objection, we do not need to disagree with him that theology is concerned with "the knowledge of God"; for even when we acknowledge this to be the central concern of theology, there are important respects in which political and economic concerns cannot be divorced from theology. Mouw suggests three reasons why politics and economics cannot be divorced from theology.

First, since the task of theology has to do with the knowledge of the God who reveals his will in and through the Scriptures, we cannot ignore, in our doctrine of God, the manner in which political and economic concerns pervade the biblical narrative. The Bible does not devalue the participation of human beings in political and economic affairs. God's promise to bless the descendants of Abraham included references to their *political* and *economic* well-being; when the Israelites were rescued out of Egypt, the bonds of their *political* oppression had to be broken; the psalmists wrote *political* prayers; the prophets delivered messages about *political* and *economic* policies; Jesus himself faced *political* temptations; and apocalyptic visions include *political*

and *economic* scenarios. Thus Christians who profess a high view of Scripture could be expected to have a particular interest in political matters.

A second reason is that the Bible does more than merely picture human beings as involved in political relationships; it applies these categories to God himself. It does so directly, by referring to God as “ruler” and “king”; but it also does so by implication. If God is all powerful, for example, it is necessary to ask how the power of earthly rulers is to be assessed in relation to his power; if God is just, we are compelled to inquire whether human patterns of justice compare favorably with divine standards.

The fact is that the “knowledge of God” toward which theology aims is very broad. It is knowledge of the God who has revealed the riches of his grace in response to the full scope of our sinful predicament. Any account of human sin that leaves out reference to human rebellion in the political realm is thereby an impoverished one.

Third, Henry’s objection, if taken seriously, would put more restrictions on theology than are desirable. If Christology is a proper division of theology, how can we avoid the social dimension of the early church’s confession that Jesus is Lord and King? Similarly, the concept of “the Kingdom of God” is central to discussions in eschatology. Even if one suspects that the political connotations of many traditional theological concepts are only apparent ones—so that we would have to empty such terms as *ruler*, *kingdom*, and *lord* of their ordinary meanings in theological discussion—this is something that would require careful demonstration, not simply an assumption used to begin discussion. Even if a completely “apolitical” theology is possible, then, we could only attain it by engaging in a lengthy discussion of political concepts—for no other reason than to purge them from our theology.

But there’s no reason to think theology should be apolitical. We would do well to take seriously the fact that political references are woven into the biblical narrative. But how should we go about the business of taking this biblical message seriously? How should we use the Bible to ground our political reflection?

That, indeed, is the question: How should the Bible be used to ground Protestant political reflection? In fact, the question could be put as follows: How should theology, Scripture, and church history inform the project of bringing definition and coherence to the conflicting strands of Protestant social reflection? *Caritas in Veritate* is an elegant example of how each of the previously mentioned fields informs Benedict XVI’s reading of the social, economic, and political signs of the times. It remains to be seen whether Protestant and evangelical social thought can pull together its discordant theological strands to produce a finely embroidered garment to warm its body politic.

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