

Politics is primarily concerned with making laws, which is why most legislators are lawyers. One can no more get politics out of law than one can get sin out of the gospel. Law protects people from those who would oppress, persecute, and otherwise prey on them. Law is the *syntax* of life in a fallen world. The problem is not that politicians make laws but that we do not elect competent, thoughtful politicians who create sensible laws they can explain. As J. Daryl Charles observes, “Since law is part of creation, the very order of things as they are, it is a biblical, anthropological and eminently theological question” (24). Natural law guides just lawmakers to formulate just laws. Natural law is far older than evangelicalism, and it exists independently of its advocates and critics! Those striving to reason as Christians about politics and justice will find authentic wisdom in this volume to deepen their thought.

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Flourishing Faith: A Baptist Primer on Work, Economics, and Civic Stewardship

Chad Brand

Foreword by Daniel L. Akin

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian’s Library Press, 2012 (152 pages)

Professor Brand’s book is a Christian’s endeavor to make sense of the connection between the Christian religion and the issues of work and political economy. Brand approaches the subject matter as a former pastor and professor of Christian theology. I should say at the outset that I read the book as a professor of economics whose special emphasis is political economy. With that said, my overall impression of Professor Brand’s work is that it is generally correct, and it is an important work at a time when Christians must understand the substance of his central message: People ought to be free to work according to their unique gifts and talents and government should not impose great hindrances on them.

Of the seven chapters that make up the book, in my view two, in particular, stand out as excellent and are well worth the price of admission. They are chapter 3, “Wealth,” and chapter 4 “The City of Man.” In chapter 3, Brand does a good job of distinguishing between money and wealth, noting that the accumulation of wealth is important. He explores many of the scriptural passages that warn us about the pitfalls of loving money and our possessions more than God and what the results of that behavior are likely to lead to. He goes on to explain that wealth is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. His main focus is to develop a theology of wealth in the Christian era beginning with Saint Augustine. He then moves through the ages and concludes with Thomas Aquinas and the rise of natural law. While I thought some additional features of the story would be helpful to the reader, what the author does offer is essentially correct. The only misstatement I found is Brand’s

claim that “wealth created by theft or government extraction creates moral *decay*.” The problem with this statement is that theft and government extraction do not create anything. They merely redistribute what is already created. To his credit, Brand corrects this in a later chapter where he is careful to state the matter the right way.

Chapter 4, “The City of Man,” is the high water mark of the book. Brand provides an excellent history of Israel’s political economy during the time of the kings. He points out the problems that arose when Solomon began to abuse his power by laying extraordinary taxes on the people. The crisis created by this abuse is intensified by his son Rehoboam who compounds the economic and social problems by more of the same. Such policies have never worked to promote human flourishing in all of history and cannot work because they deny the foundational principles of morality and economics.

In the second half of the chapter, Brand turns his attention to the Christian era. He explains the problems that early Christians faced living in the Roman world. Despite the early obstacles, the religion flourished, eventually becoming intertwined with the state. At this point, the author aims to tell the story of the problems this led to for both church and state. While it is difficult to compress a thousand-plus years of history on the subject into a few short pages, Brand does an admirable job. While there may be numerous points of debate that we might engage the author with, his overall message is a very sound one: We ought to keep church and state issues separate in this world. To make his point, he appeals to the rise of the Anabaptists and the political conflicts they faced in attempting to promote their belief in believer’s baptism over infant baptism, a belief that often had them at odds with the prevailing laws of the time. While Brand might have pointed to many other such doctrinal differences, it is clear that for men to live together in relative peace, some degree of tolerance of differences in belief should be recognized.

Chapter 5 of the book is titled, “Other People’s Money.” The opening pages of the chapter provide a scathing indictment of proponents of the forced redistribution of private property as promoted by progressives and socialists such as Franklin Roosevelt. In it, Brand argues effectively that all such efforts amount to legalized theft. However, after doing an admirable job of defeating the arguments of redistributionists, the author nevertheless acquiesces to some level of forced redistribution. As he puts it,

Is such redistribution justifiable?... I think at *some level* it is. We live in a large country with a complicated network of federal, state, county, and municipal governments, with some of those more local governments strapped for resources.... There ought to be some level of welfare available to the extremely needy. (76)

While it is certainly true that we have a large country and that some cities are on the verge of bankruptcy and there are many needy people, it is not at all certain that any state sponsored welfare is called for. Indeed, it never seems to occur to Dr. Brand that the very reason for many of the problems he mentions is our departure from sound economic and moral principles. In fact, as a political economist who has studied the matter for forty years, it is my view that if everyone understood that the role of government was merely one of defending the equal rights of everyone’s private property, then many of these problems

would go away. That is not to say that we would then live in a perfect world but that much of what we suffer is what we have brought upon ourselves. On this point, Brand and I are very often in agreement. At this point in time, though, it seems to me that simply calling for a reduction in the size of the welfare state is nothing more than a call for only doing a little bit of evil rather than a lot of evil. To be sure, there is no golden age where government was kept in its proper role, but we should not confuse principle and practice.

Despite this criticism, as I said in the beginning, my overall impression of the book is very favorable. Dr. Brand has, for the most part, undertaken a book on a subject that required him to stretch himself a bit beyond his expertise, and he has done so in a way that does considerable justice to the topic. While there are other issues of debate here and there, he generally reaches solid conclusions. In an age when most people believe a set of lies, half-truths, and myths about political economy, especially in the Christian community, Professor Brand's book is both timely and important.

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**The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy:
 Essays in Political Philosophy and on Catholic
 Social Teaching**
Martin Rhonheimer
William F. Murphy, Jr. (Translator)
 Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press,
 2013 (560 pages)

Martin Rhonheimer, professor of ethics and political philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, is best known in Anglophone circles as a Catholic philosopher engaged in some of the more interesting debates about the natural moral law, Thomistic action theory, and applied ethics. Collections of his essays and two monographs in these fields have been published by the Catholic University of America Press and Fordham University Press since 2000. *The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy* is the first work in Rhonheimer's *oeuvre* published in English that squarely addresses central issues in political theory. Almost all of the essays presented in the book had been previously published, but only five of the fourteen essays have appeared in English before.

Rhonheimer sets out his stall clearly in his opening chapter, "Why Is Political Philosophy Necessary?" This essay, along with the third chapter, "The Democratic Constitutional State and the Common Good," and chapter 14, "Christianity and Secularity," sets out his methodological stance for the whole collection of essays by outlining an approach that refreshingly takes political ethics to be distinct but not separable from other aspects of practical philosophy. So well-conceived are these reflections on method, I would venture to suggest that some (or all) of these core essays should be required reading in academic programs focusing on political theology or political theory from a Catholic orientation.