KAITLYN SCHIESS

THE BALLOT AND THE BIBLE

HOW SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN USED AND ABUSED IN AMERICAN POLITICS

AND WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

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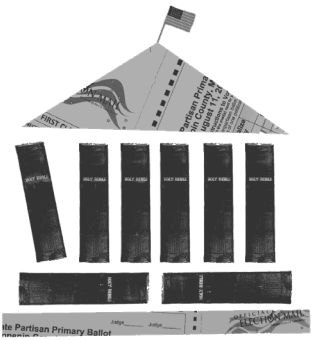

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Introduction

Is That Your Bible?

In June 2020, during nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd, President Donald Trump posed with a Bible outside St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. Police used riot-control tactics to clear protesters from Lafayette Square to prepare for the photo op. Trump bounced the Bible in his hands for a few moments before holding it up for reporters to photograph. When asked, "Is that your Bible?" President Trump responded, "It's *a* Bible."

For many Americans, the scene epitomized the relationship between Scripture and politics: the Bible is a prop, a tool for leaders to exploit for their purposes. For many American Christians, that question Trump received is important. We consider ourselves "Bible people," and we put great stock in *personal* faith. Owning and reading our *own* Bibles, spending daily "quiet time" reading them, taking them to church so that we can read along on our own—much of American Protestantism is shaped by Bible ownership.

But it's also an important question for American Christians in another sense. We live in a Bible-haunted nation. Our history is full of politicians invoking biblical images. Much of our shared

language comes from the Old and New Testaments. Our national story has been shaped by biblical accounts of wandering, exile, and redemption. So, for American Christians living in a nation deeply shaped by the Bible, it might be worth asking the same question the reporter asked Trump: Is that *your* Bible? Do you feel as if your team has scored some points when national leaders quote it? Do you feel responsible to correct when it is misused? Does it more strongly shape your politics than how loosely and conveniently it seems to shape national politics?

While I was writing this book, the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that federally protected abortion access. In the final weeks of writing this book, President Biden announced a plan to forgive federal student loan debt, restructure repayment plans, and allow people paying their reduced minimum monthly payment to not accrue interest. In both of these important moments, Scripture played a crucial role.

The abortion debate batted Psalm 139 and Numbers 5 back and forth. The student loan debate pitted the Old Testament law's description of Jubilee against proverbs such as the beginning of Psalm 37:21: "The wicked borrow and do not repay." While much could be said about the interpretation and applicability of these verses, something more foundational is going on. People on both the right and the left constantly claimed that the other side was hypocritical for caring about what the Bible taught in one case but ignoring it in another. This raises an important question at the heart of this book: *How* should Scripture inform our political beliefs?

For all our familiarity with the Bible, we are woefully ignorant about *how* or *why* we are using the Bible in politics. How can we apply passages written thousands of years ago to political issues today? How can we dialogue with people who interpret passages differently than we do? How can we respond to social-media posts with cherry-picked verses?

To be clear, this book will not give you a list of interpretation methods or rules, nor will it give the definitive interpretations of the passages that are typically referenced in political conversations.

Instead, it poses the question "Is that your Bible?" to the complicated and contentious history of American politics. It notes moments of proper application and examples of deep misuse. It describes examples of biblical argumentation from pastors, politicians, pundits, and ordinary people.

There are many interesting examples in American history that this book does not cover: we could spend entire chapters on the perennial fights about the faith of the Founding Fathers, the biblical passages about war and peace cited during the Vietnam War, or Jimmy Carter's religious background. This book focuses less on how the Bible has influenced specific policies, though we'll have plenty of reason to note that occasionally. The real goal is to examine how the Bible has shaped more general, foundational political theology questions: What is government? What is the relationship between theology and politics? How should Christians think about their political participation? These questions typically get lost in our conversations. We jump into the juicy fight of the moment, whip out our favorite Bible verses, and completely forget to ask if we even agree on the nature of human government or the relationship between the church and earthly governments.

In focusing on American history, this book has two goals: (1) to mine history for examples of biblical interpretation distanced enough from our own context that we might be able to see things clouding our judgment in the heat of our own debates, and (2) to gain a rough sketch of some of the political biblical-interpretation trends and traditions that have shaped America.

All of us have inherited theological traditions, reading habits, and political biases that shape how we read Scripture. Many of us are more shaped by our political hermeneutics than our theological traditions. These reading habits cross denominations and party affiliations, making up the wider hermeneutical context of American political thought.

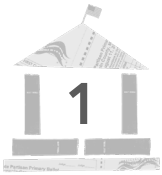
If we want to understand Scripture better and apply it more faithfully—as well as to converse with compassion and conviction on topics where we are in disagreement with others—we will need to know our Bible *and* our history. We will need to examine not

only our stated principles of biblical interpretation but also the habits of our hearts. We will need to see passages of Scripture in new light, look at them through old conflicts, and ask fresh questions about our politics and our faith.

This book is motivated by the conviction that, for Christians, the answer to the question "Is that your Bible?" is an emphatic *yes*. The Bible is not a free-floating book of ageless wisdom, an interesting historical document, or a weapon that can be put in the service of any political goal. The Bible is a gift from God to the church, given for a particular purpose: to shape that community into the kind of people who can fulfill their commission to make disciples of all nations and steward God's good creation, anticipating its final redemption.[1]

As such, the Bible should be read as the book of the church, in the church. Our reading of Scripture should be informed both by the global historic church (receiving the theology handed down to us, learning from Christians throughout history and around the world) and by the church in a particular time and place. We will be more faithful readers and doers of the Word of God if we learn how the church has received and read the Bible in the time and place nearest us. What habits—good and bad—are we prone to? What insights are unique gifts of our time and place, and what are our unique mistakes?

Learning our own history will not magically solve our problems. We will remain often confounded about how—or if—the Bible addresses the pressing political questions of our day. But my hope is that these chapters will give us examples to wrestle with and a history to reflect on. Most of all, I hope these chapters deepen our desire to be shaped by Scripture—to allow the language, images, and grand story of this marvelous book to impact every area of our lives, including the few but important moments we spend in a voting booth.



A City on a Hill

An American Legacy of Puritan Biblical Interpretation

> For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.
>
> —John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630

A city on a hill. These words have captivated Americans for generations. They encapsulate our sense of collective destiny, divine mission, and moral strength. They pack into one little phrase a larger tale about a band of religiously persecuted patriots who crossed a dangerous ocean, discovered a new land, and built the United States of America.

These words have come to have such deep political significance for Americans that we might forget they come from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount:

> You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

> Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16)

John Winthrop, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, reached for these words (among many others) in his 1630 message "A Model of Christian Charity." History textbooks often style Winthrop as the "puritan Moses,"[1] delivering a speech at the dawn of America's founding that would shape the ethos of the following centuries.

The history is more complicated than that: Winthrop's speech was not a missive on American exceptionalism, and it did not become influential in American identity until the late twentieth century. Even more complicated are the questions of whether Winthrop's use of Matthew 5 exemplified good hermeneutics, whether the resulting history resembles anything like faithful biblical interpretation, and how Christians should approach applying biblical commands and promises to our political communities. What is the city on a hill? *Who* is it? And do Jesus's words mean anything for our political life together?

How the "City" Became Co-opted

Winthrop's speech has been called the "most famous lay sermon in American history" even though it probably wasn't a sermon.[2] It has been cited as the source of America's supposed strengths *and* ills even though it went practically unnoticed by American politicians and historians for over three hundred years. It has been called the "book of Genesis in America's political Bible" even though its original author was neither American nor could have imagined the founding of the country over a hundred years later.[3]

It is not clear exactly when Winthrop wrote "A Model of Christian Charity" or where (or even if) he delivered it, though the common story is that he gave it aboard the ship *Arbella* as it journeyed across the Atlantic.[4] The bulk of the text covers Winthrop's

understanding of Christian charity. God has ordained a hierarchal social order, Winthrop says, in which the rich should not abuse their wealth but provide for the poor, and the poor should not rebel against their station but receive God's gifts through the rich.[5]

Winthrop goes on to describe Christian obligations of charity in surprisingly radical ways. Everyone should care for the poor, lend generously to siblings in Christ, and forgive freely if their debtors cannot pay back their loans. Winthrop describes the love that must bind together the fellow Christians journeying into a new colony: "We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren." He quotes Isaiah 58:6–7 when describing giving to the poor: "Is not this the fast I have chosen, . . . to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke, to deal thy bread to the hungry and to bring the poor that wander into thy house . . . ?"[6] Winthrop's words express something all Christians can support: a desire for our communities to be ordered by God's vision for his creatures' flourishing.[7]

Winthrop's words are also full of much more apprehension than later storytelling would lead us to believe. While he does use strong language to describe the commission of this group of Christians, the biblical references to Israel's covenant with God and Jesus's famous sermon are used to inspire caution and reverence more than self-importance. The people are asking God for "favor and blessing," but they also know that if they disobey his commands, "the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us."[8] It is not exactly surprising that later politicians would favor the more triumphant-sounding language.

It is easy to understand why someone might read "A Model of Christian Charity," or even just the phrase "a city upon a hill," and hear undertones of a familiar story about a nation blessed by God. The speech makes perfect sense as the potent beginning to a narrative many Americans today know well. But Winthrop's words went largely unnoticed for hundreds of years, in part because using the biblical language of the covenant to describe the colonies was commonplace at the time.[9] Even historians who did reference "A Model of Christian Charity" focused more on the charity part than

on a city on a hill.[10] The history of our associations of a city on a hill with American exceptionalism and the Christian founding of our country begins not in 1630 but in 1961.

By the time John F. Kennedy spoke to the Massachusetts State Legislature a few weeks before his inauguration, the Puritans had increasingly become a part of the story that America told of its founding.[11] They were exemplars of the American dream, the root of America's Christian past, and, for the president-elect from Massachusetts, an important connection to trailblazing forebears. "For we are setting out upon a voyage in 1961 no less hazardous than that undertaken by the *Arabella* in 1630," Kennedy said, using a characteristic mispronunciation of the ship's name.[12] The world was watching, the task was daunting, and the language of "a city upon a hill" was ripe for appropriating.

Ronald Reagan would transform the little phrase into "one of the most familiar lines in the liturgy of the American civil religion."[13] He referenced the phrase in various speeches throughout his career, but he gave the most detailed explanation of his city on a hill in his 1989 farewell speech:

> I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind, it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind swept, God blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace—a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors, and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.[14]

For Reagan, the city on a hill powerfully revved up American pride. He used it to describe a standard of moral goodness, commercial power, or military strength from which America was close to falling. He used it to imbue any political message with the urgency and significance of divine mandate.[15]

Historian Richard Gamble says Reagan "invented" the "city on a hill" as Americans know it today. What was once primarily a metaphor that Jesus used to describe the identity of his followers

was now a political slogan.[16] With the backing of a conservative political lobby, Newt Gingrich released a film in 2011 called *A City on a Hill: The Spirit of American Exceptionalism*. Glenn Beck made a short film about "A Model of Christian Charity" in 2014.[17] During the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton included in her list of affirmations of America: "We're still Reagan's shining city on a hill."[18] Now the shining city was not Jesus's but Reagan's.

What began as a religious call for right living in 1630 became a defense of American exceptionalism in the Cold War era. It became a signature of Reagan's presidency, and afterward "virtually no serious political figure could escape the obligation to quote it."[19] Wrapped up in this one little phrase is a host of moral, political, and religious ideas of great importance to many Americans. Yet the history of the phrase is not the history of a biblical truth piloting the grand trajectory of a nation. Rather, it's the history of how America seized a metaphor and shaped it into a story to tell about ourselves.

It's a story both common and complicated, a story of taking biblical language and employing it in service of unfamiliar goals. As such, it's an important starting place for us to begin thinking about how to faithfully interpret Scripture politically.

The "city upon a hill" image exemplifies a common problem: we pluck promises of provision or judgment that were given to Israel or the church and apply them wholesale to America. We misapply promises because we misunderstand *who* is being addressed. We are often narcissistic and nationalistic readers, seeing our own nation as the subject of every promise or command. This problem might be the besetting sin of American political theology.

And yet we all recognize that Scripture has much to say not only about how Israel was to organize itself as a community or how the church should build a life together but about a host of other issues relevant to our political lives. It tells us about what kind of creatures humans are, what it looks like for us to live together in peace, what appropriate authority looks like, and how to structure a flourishing community. But before we rush into pulling passages from Scripture and applying them to our own political context, we need to have a hermeneutic that can prevent us from misapplication

and misunderstanding. The Sermon on the Mount *should* inform our political theology, just maybe not in the way it has in the past.

Israel, the Church, and America

Just after delivering the Beatitudes—blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers—Jesus launches into his famous metaphors of salt, light, and a city on a hill. We're so familiar with these words that we might not even pause to ask who Jesus is addressing. Who is the "you" that Jesus calls "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13) and "the light of the world" (5:14) and compares to "a town built on a hill" (5:14)?

One thing we know for sure is that the "you" is plural. English does not have a distinct second-person plural pronoun like many other languages, so when we say "you," it's not clear apart from context if we're addressing one person or many. But in Greek it is clear. Jesus basically says, "Y'all are the salt of the earth" and "Y'all are the light of the world."[20] Jesus is addressing a group, but what group? The crowd listening to the sermon, the Jewish people, the not-yet-existing institutional church? There is a long history of interpretation here that follows larger disagreements about how to define and understand the church, but Jesus is clearly *not* describing an earthly political arrangement.

Of course, America isn't the first nation to use cosmic language to understand its significance. A century before Jesus's sermon, Cicero used the image of a city as a light to the world to describe Rome. Jesus takes this image and uses it to describe the good deeds of people that prompt praise to God (Matt. 5:16) rather than promoting military or economic strength.[21]

Jesus draws on language and images Scripture uses to describe the *people of God* in his sermon. The Old Testament uses light imagery to describe God (Gen. 1:3; Isa. 60:1–3) and speaks of the identity, orientation, and mission of the people of God as a light to the world, a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:2; 22:18; Isa. 2:2–5; 42:6; 49:6).[22] God has always been concerned with the whole world, and even his particular blessings have a universal purpose.

If you go back and read the whole sermon, you'll see that this one little phrase is part of a larger point: God's people are blessed for *the sake of the world*. We are oriented not merely inward toward each other but also always outward toward the world. Our witness and our work are public, not hidden or private or separate.

A theologian in the early church, John Chrysostom, interprets the passage this way: "Jesus says in effect: 'You are not accountable only for your life but also for that of the entire world.'"[23] It is especially ironic that the phrase "city on a hill" has been twisted into elevating America above other nations when it was first used in a sermon urging God's people to live for the sake of the larger world. "America First" and "city on a hill" contradict each other.

Biblical scholars have also seen in Jesus's language a reference to Jerusalem on Mount Zion—not only drawing his listeners back to the identity and mission of the Jewish people but reminding them of their ultimate hope. Isaiah 2 is one place this image is beautifully painted for God's people:

> In the last days
>
> the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
> as the highest of the mountains;
> it will be exalted above the hills,
> and all nations will stream to it.
>
> Many peoples will come and say,
>
> "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
> to the temple of the God of Jacob.
> He will teach us his ways,
> so that we may walk in his paths."
> The law will go out from Zion,
> the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
> He will judge between the nations
> and will settle disputes for many peoples.
> They will beat their swords into plowshares
> and their spears into pruning hooks.
> Nation will not take up sword against nation,
> nor will they train for war anymore. (vv. 2–4)

Jesus is using language familiar to his audience to connect the mission, identity, and hope of the people of God throughout all time.[24] God has always instructed his people to be oriented toward the world, and we have always awaited a city on a hill where the people of all nations will live in peace together by the power of our redeeming God.

Scripture is full of references to mountains and hills. There is a reason that the gospel writers take the time to say that Jesus was giving this sermon on a *mountainside* and why we continue to refer to this sermon as the Sermon on the Mount. In Israelite tradition, mountains were places of divine revelation. It is noteworthy that Jesus does not *receive* revelation on the mountain but *gives* it. This helps us know how to interpret his city on a hill. Jesus is describing a people who proclaim God's revelation to the world, who act as conduits of God's light in their own communities. Jesus is proclaiming a new era, a new people, a new program. Biblical scholar Jonathan Pennington calls the Sermon on the Mount the "founding document" for a vision of flourishing for the new community of the church.[25]

Covenants and Political Theology

When Winthrop uses this passage in "A Model of Christian Charity," he appropriates the language Jesus used to describe the new covenant. He never explicitly claims "chosen" status for his people, but over the course of the short speech, he claims the promises of biblical passages as if that were true. As he weaves passages from both Testaments into one depiction of the nascent community in America, he sometimes subtly alters references to the Mosaic law into commands for the church. Winthrop describes the colonists as entering a covenant with God, gaining a special commission, and being subject to blessing and judgment on the basis of their obedience.

Winthrop's approach is in keeping with a larger theological position common at the time, an approach that treated all earthly governments (especially one's own) as party to a covenant with

God. America was far from alone in this; during the period of the Revolution, many European communities were also looking to the Old Testament as they created new political structures.[26] The Puritans were following precedent from their previous communities in viewing all of society—their churches and civil governments—as covenanted with God.

In a universally Christian society, this idea makes a lot of sense. Government and church leaders alike are following God, and people in Scripture are often judged for communal sins, so it makes sense to think of one's community as facing consequences—good or bad—together. Puritan theologians extrapolated from the covenants described in Scripture the idea that all nations lived under an "implied covenant" with God. Nations could expect to be rewarded or punished on the basis of their adherence to Christian principles.[27]

This idea gave theological meaning to disasters, diseases, and wars, as well as to blessings such as harvests and military victories.[28] This is also why people like Winthrop conceived of church and political government as singular: the moral strength of the whole determined the blessings or curses. Rightly, this approach roots governmental authority in God's judgment rather than abstract political theories, and it describes both church and government leaders as subject to divine accountability. Winthrop was far from alone in thinking this way, and it's unlikely he thought of his own community as *uniquely* covenanted with God—the way later generations of Americans would. He thought of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as *a* city on a hill, not *the* city on a hill.[29]

This legacy—of using the language of biblical covenants to describe our nations—is a robust one in American history. You've probably heard or seen 2 Chronicles 7:14 referenced during election seasons: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

This instruction refers God's people back to the Abrahamic covenant. The promises—especially to heal their *land*—are rooted

in a specific covenant that can't be applied to any and all nations. Yet we read our own nation back into the text and tend to replace the rewards of these promises with our own national ambitions. We don't need to add words to the verse to distort it; all it takes is visually associating this verse with American flags, military symbols, and other symbols of wealth, health, or strength. We misunderstand who "my people" is, and we imbue the words "heal their land" with our own understandings of healing. All people should be exhorted to humble themselves, pray, seek the face of God, and turn from wicked ways. But no earthly government is promised healing. We're awaiting a new city, with new bounds of citizenship.

When we come to biblical texts looking for political instruction, we are never coming as blank slates. We bring our cultural and political contexts, our theological systems, and our own questions, needs, and desires. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can be dangerous if left unexamined. Winthrop and Reagan brought their political theologies to the text, and we will bring our own. Thinking about how we can read Scripture faithfully in the political sphere is never just about a list of principles or universal rules. It is about allowing Scripture to shape our theology and, in turn, allowing good theology to shape our interpretation and application.

There are some unique challenges when it comes to thinking about covenants in political theology. We need to be careful about how we read God's covenants in relation to our own time and God's providence, where we place ourselves in God's story, and how we apply God's Word in our different contexts.

What Time Is It?

The Puritans didn't emphasize the nation's virtuous strength (as in Reagan's "shining city") but rather its coming judgment. It's an emphasis that has waxed and waned in American political rhetoric, and we owe some of that to the Puritans.

It did not take long for Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (and for other colonists in their own contexts) to bemoan the

moral state of their communities. By the time Winthrop died in 1649, his community looked little like his grand vision of brotherly love, care for the poor, and faithful worship.

Across New England, Puritans disagreed about a range of issues, and their communities had lost much of their religious zeal.[30] The Puritans had conceived of a society where the church and civic community were synonymous, but twenty years later, more than half of the adults in Boston did not belong to a church.[31] This led to a rise in a form of preaching called the jeremiad, a sermon in the style of biblical laments and prophecies that would exercise great influence over American religion and politics.[32] The Puritans were already familiar with this sermonic form: many of them left England for fear of the judgments coming to the morally declining church.[33] Jeremiads describe moral decline, warn of coming judgment, and exhort listeners to urgent action.[34]

Winthrop's speech is not quite a jeremiad, but it illustrates the theological context that made jeremiads so popular. If the community was party to a special covenant with God, then the members could expect their obedience to be rewarded and their disobedience punished in ways similar to those found in biblical accounts. Winthrop (and generations of politicians and pastors after him) appropriates the terms of Old Testament covenants, warning listeners that material blessings or judgments will follow their actions. These accounts also often favor decline narratives (assurances of blessings do not pack the same punch), placing a community in a certain spot in history and narrating the past and the future with astonishing certainty.

There are two problems here. First, we tend to take promises of blessing and judgment from different covenants and apply them to our own communities. And second, we read Scripture as if we know with certainty where we stand in it. While we may know better than to take promises given to Israel and apply them to a specific nation today, our reading of Scripture often comes with an assumption about what "time" it is.

We operate out of either a decline or progress narrative in which history's trajectory is intelligible to us. To say that things are always

moving in one direction (constantly improving or continually degenerating) is to say that history follows a certain course that we can accurately chart. We make political judgments as if we are standing high above history, knowing what has come before and what will come after us, and can judge the "direction" we are headed in. Christians can sometimes have theological reasons—for example, our beliefs about the end times—for holding to progression or declension narratives. But we are also often swayed by the general mood of our culture or context. When are the "good times"—in our wistfully remembered past or just around the bend of our next great improvement? Where do we find ourselves in the grand scheme of time? These questions will shape how we read Scripture, where we see ourselves in stories or instructions, and when and how we think certain verses are applicable.

The Missing Noachian Covenant

There's another pitfall when we misapply biblical covenants to our own nations: we miss the covenant for *all* nations that is actually in the Bible. We tend to think of Noah as a children's story about a cute little ark with its cute little animals and a cheery rainbow at the end. We miss the crucially important covenant described in that (much darker than advertised) story. In Genesis 9, after Noah and his family come out of the ark, God establishes a covenant with Noah, his family, and all living creatures. This covenant is important for thinking about what God demands of modern nations, because unlike the Mosaic covenant that Puritan writers referenced or the new covenant Jesus described, this covenant was made with *all* people. "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth" (Gen. 9:9–10).

God made a covenant with every living creature, and the rest of the Old Testament shows how nations are judged on the basis of that covenant. God was grieved with the ways of the world before

the flood: the endless ways people can mistreat each other are well documented in just the first few chapters of Genesis. After the flood he makes clear both the obligation for all humans to treat each other well and the reason for this (they are made in his image).

There is a long tradition of Israel's prophets condemning the nations for their mistreatment of humans made in the image of God. These noncovenantal nations are not judged for disobeying the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant; rather, they are judged for the way they treat other humans. They are condemned for violence (Joel 3:2–3, 5–6; Amos 1:11–12; 2:1–3; Hab. 2:12–13; Jer. 49:16; 51:35, 49; Ezek. 25:15), oppressing the poor (Mal. 3:4; Isa. 10:20; 19:20), gloating in others' destruction (Ezek. 25:3), taking advantage of others (Ezek. 26:2), and slavery (Ezek. 29:7). This does not give us a comprehensive list of the policies any nation should adopt, but it does give us some general guidance about how God judges all nations.[35] The United States of America as a nation is not party to a special covenant, but it is party to the Noachian covenant, and it will be judged, like all nations, by those standards.

We miss this covenant when we appropriate covenants with Israel for our own countries—to our own peril. The demands of the Noachian covenant provide a foundational political ethic for Christians, whether political leaders or citizens participating in the larger political process. The image of God is not a doctrinal obscurity, something we read in Genesis and affirm as theologically correct with no other effects in our personal and political lives. Our appropriate discomfort with applying promises to Israel to our own nation does not leave us without biblical resources for political work. The Noachian covenant and the prophecies against the nations should shape the demands we as citizens make on our governments.

In addition, in Scripture, covenants are initiated by God: God begins the conversation, sets the terms, and graciously invites humans into special relationship with him (for some examples, see Gen. 12; 15; 17; Exod. 19–24; 2 Sam. 7; Jer. 31). By contrast, in Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," *the humans* decide

that they are in a covenant with God. This is akin to reverse engineering the covenant process, putting humans in God's role.[36]

Winthrop describes the collective action and posture of his people in just that way. They approach God ("We have hereupon besought him"), determine the terms of the covenant ("draw our own articles"), and describe how they will know if they have kept it. He even writes as if God has responded: "then hath he ratified this covenant." Winthrop ends the document with a quotation from Deuteronomy: "For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess" (30:16).[37] Now the land that the colony is crossing an ocean to "possess" is a divine gift.

When *we* set the terms of our own covenants, we will claim promises that are not ours to claim, such as a divine right to a land God never gave.

Applying Biblical Standards Faithfully

It is easy, with hindsight, to see the problems in misapplying biblical promises. But we also know that making faithful political decisions in our world requires us to turn to Scripture, and we don't want to ignore huge chunks of it because it was delivered to the people of Israel or directed specifically to the church. No one really does this either: we are all in the business of picking and choosing which passages apply to our own contexts. Some Christians will find passages about Israel's sexual misconduct and subsequent judgment and apply them to their own nation; others will apply passages about caring for the poor and foreigners to their own nation's immigration or welfare policies. We are not without resources for judging between these different applications, but we need to be honest about whether we are picking and choosing—and, if we are, *why* we are doing so.

Winthrop wanted to apply biblical standards to his earthly community, and most Christians want to do the same. While there are

examples of these Puritan communities that highlight the *danger* of this (making church membership a requirement for civil participation, excommunicating people from the church *and* the city), we can also see commendable examples. When merchant Robert Keayne took advantage of the scarcity of imported goods in the fledgling community, Boston courts fined him for price gouging—for not making "others' conditions our own" as Winthrop had described.[38] That sounds like Christian theology informing policy in a positive way. Winthrop was right to think that Christian commitments should inform how we approach the shape, purpose, and rules of civil government.

He was also right to think that ideas, stories, and concepts from God's dealings with Israel have relevance for us today. Christians see the Old Testament as prefiguring events in the New, and we agree with Winthrop that God's revelation informs our understanding of human nature, the purpose and structure of human communities, and the character and work of God in human history.

We want to share at least one thing with Winthrop—"thinking in biblical time."[39] We want to be so immersed in Scripture's language and story that it flows out of us in all we say and do.[40] We want to identify with the people of God described throughout all of Scripture, believe that God's Word is living and active, and expect ancient stories to speak to our lives today. But we also want to avoid plucking passages out of their context and avoid overconfidently applying them to specific political projects. Richard Bauckham says that our reading of Scripture for politics needs to be "both more disciplined and more imaginative" than current attempts.[41] This will require knowing our Bible and ourselves better, and it will require reliance on the Holy Spirit as much as reliance on Bible-study tools.

In his influential work of political theology *Desire of the Nations*, Oliver O'Donovan describes the "unique covenant" between God and Israel as "a point of disclosure from which the nature of all political authority comes into view."[42] He treads the line well between an overidentification of Israel's covenantal status with any other earthly nation and a strictly literal approach that allows us to

appreciate the Old Testament only from afar. O'Donovan describes earthly political work as providing us with "partial indications of what God is doing in human history," while that political work must also be placed in the context of God's wider redemptive purpose.[43]

We need to be wary of pulling passages out of their context. But we also need to be wary of any approach to Scripture that does not place both the text and our own work in the larger context of God's redemptive story. We can find prophetic passages, stories of the rise and fall of rulers, and divine instructions in Scripture that *are* relevant and instructive for our time, but that does not mean that all biblical language is free-floating, ready to be affixed to any project or idea. First and foremost, the biblical text's rightful place is within the "economy of God's communicative grace."[44]

A Nation and a Sermon

Many Americans celebrate the fact that our nation's political history is full of biblical references, images, and allusions. In some ways, it is. We want ourselves saturated in Scripture, breathing in and out its life-giving message. But one of the problems with using biblical language in politics is the way that words and phrases can be plucked from their context, stripped of their content, and refilled with alternate meanings. Many Americans will think of Lincoln before Jesus when they hear the phrase "a house divided," or remember President Bush's speeches after 9/11 before they think of the beginning of John's Gospel when they hear "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it."

This is the power and peril of biblical language, and Jesus's words to his people that they would be like a city on a hill are an excellent example. The complicated history of this little phrase reminds us to interrogate the overly familiar language coursing through our political system. Richard Gamble said that the metaphor "vanishes into America's political rhetoric the way a repeated pattern disappears into busy wallpaper."[45] We need to have eyes to see those repeated patterns and hearts intent on seeking after God's truth above all else.