

# Awaiting the King

REFORMING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Volume 3 of Cultural Liturgies

James K. A. Smith



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For our friends at Cardus  
and the team at *Comment*,  
in partnership for the renewal of  
North American social architecture

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

Mark 15:43

Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical. Rule out the political questions and you cut short the proclamation of God's saving power; you leave people enslaved where they ought to be set free from sin—their own sin and others'.

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*

So long as the Church preaches the gospel and functions as a properly “political” reality, a polity of her own, the kings of the earth have a problem on their hands. . . . As soon as the church appears, it becomes clear to any alert politician that worldly politics is no longer the only game in town. The introduction of the church into *any* city means that the city has a challenger within its walls.

Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity*

[Political theology] has, in the first place, pastoral importance: to give guidance to those who, believing the Christian faith or capable of suspending their unbelief, have to exercise political responsibilities. Nothing very specialized need be envisaged here; we need not confine political ethics to the mirror-for-princes mold, as a professional science of politicians or civil servants. The responsibilities are those which we all face, regardless of our views on political institutions and the propriety of taking a leading role in them. . . . Hermit and politician both have to make up their minds as to whether they can acknowledge the institutions that claim to serve them.

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*

Fear is not a Christian habit of mind.

Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*

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## Preface

If this book has taken much longer than I ever would have anticipated, that's because it's a very different book from the one I envisioned when *Desiring the Kingdom* was published in 2009. At that time, I imagined the projected third volume of the Cultural Liturgies project as something like “Hauerwas for Kuyperians,” a come-to-Yoder altar call for all those who were so enthusiastic about “transforming” culture and affirming common grace. My primary concern was to revivify what in the Reformed tradition we call the “antithetical” side of the tradition—the critical, prophetic impetus that says “No!” to cultural assimilation and political injustice (a voice one can hear most clearly in Richard Mouw’s books from the early 1970s). In my experience, the affirmative “common grace” side of the tradition had been enlisted to say “Yes!” to culture in ways that simply baptized the status quo. Under the banner of “transforming” culture, we marched straight into our own assimilation.

However, as my questions continued to percolate, some of my assumptions and analyses began to shift underfoot. I can particularly recall a conversation with my friend Hans Boersma that lodged a question I couldn't quite shake. That question, in turn, propelled me toward two concurrent immersions over the past five years: an ongoing engagement with Augustine's *City of God* and serious interaction with the corpus of Oliver O'Donovan. Both occasioned serious rethinking that took me back to the core convictions behind *Desiring the Kingdom* but then helped me to plot a different path to volume 3. As a result, one of my new hopes for this book is diaconal: I have tried to come alongside the seminal work of Augustine and O'Donovan as a translator and teacher, hoping to tease out the implications of their theology for a wider audience of practitioners.

So in the decade that I've been at work on the Cultural Liturgies project, the arc of my thinking has taken me from common grace to antithesis and back to an emphasis on our common life, but with what Paul Ricoeur would call a "second naïveté": attentive to the deformative power of our political participation but not willing to give up on the call to love our neighbor by building healthy, just, shared institutions conducive to flourishing. The result, I think, is a "reformed" Reformed public theology that is more catholic. But I also hope it is now a work that is more constructively helpful to those engaged in the beautiful mess that is our common life, and a resource for those who shepherd such practitioners.

That said, this makes no claims to being a handbook for princes or a manual for congressional staffers. Nor is this anything close to the last word. I can already see a more fine-grained book I want to write on an implicit theology of public policy. But my hope is that this book provides a new frame for political theology and public engagement that moves us beyond the postfundamentalist need for permission ("the good of politics") as well as the (understandable) suspicion of liberalism and the state (the so-called Benedict Option). Refusing both activism and quietism, we face the task of learning how to actively wait in the meantime of the *saeculum*.

Every political theology is exorcising demons—the question is which demons. At the beginning of the Cultural Liturgies project, I was wrangling with the effects of Kuyperian triumphalism—or at least a particular evangelical rendition of such; today it's the surprise of Trumpism and a newly energized (white) nationalism. Tomorrow? Who knows what rough beast will come slouching our way. But this generational context perhaps explains why, for many political theologians of my generation, the work of Stanley Hauerwas has been both a launching pad and a foil. Reading *Resident Aliens* is a kind of Rorschach test: the way a mainline Methodist reads it will be different from the way someone like me—an evangelical (of sorts) in the Reformed tradition—does. An heir of a certain version of Abraham Kuyper encouraged to "transform culture," I learned from Hauerwas and Willimon how often, under the banner of cultural transformation, we end up with cultural assimilation.

It wasn't until I read *Resident Aliens* that I realized I lacked a functional ecclesiology. Hauerwas and Willimon woke me up to a sense that the church has its own cultural center of gravity. We didn't have to figure out how to hook up "Christ" with "culture," because the body of Christ is a culture, and specifically a formative culture. For those of us breaking out of fundamentalism, the Reformed tradition offered a "common grace" license that enabled us to say yes to culture. But in our new enthusiasm for affirmation, we tended to lose the other side of Kuyper's philosophy—an emphasis on antithesis.

And as North American evangelicals, we tended to be deaf to Kuyper's own, thicker ecclesiology. So *Resident Aliens* was apocalyptic for me in the sense of unveiling the deformative power of those other spheres of life we were so eager to affirm and transform.

Many of my generation, I think, received this antithesis as a dichotomy: church *instead of* state. We would devote ourselves to setting up an "alternative polis," the liberal democratic state be damned. I don't think this was the authors' intention, but their rhetoric didn't do much to curb that conclusion.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the church-as-polis: rereading Augustine's *City of God* alongside the work of Oliver O'Donovan and Peter Leithart, I can now imagine being a resident alien *and* invested in the state, in all of its glorious failing. The antithesis is always ad hoc. And the Spirit can bend political orders. You might say that, ironically, *Resident Aliens* brought me to a new, highly qualified appreciation of Christendom—not in the sense of a diminished "civil religion," but in O'Donovan's robust sense of a society that bears the "crater marks" of the gospel's impact. Charles Marsh's account of the civil rights movement in *The Beloved Community* was a catalyst in this respect. He described a "resident alien" community that hoped its specifically Christian witness would make a dent on the laws of the land. Marsh's tale also narrates what happened when the civil rights movement lost its ecclesial center of gravity. Faithful witness is a precarious dance. Thus I've come back to my Reformed inheritance with new lenses, honed by this Augustinian encounter, in hopes of *reforming* Reformed public theology rather than rejecting it or razing it to the ground. Therefore, just as I envisioned *Desiring the Kingdom* as a corrective supplement to the "worldview" approach of the Reformed tradition, I hope *Awaiting the King* comes alongside to nuance the earlier work of my confreres in the Reformed tradition, like Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, and especially those more recently who have been mentors and models, like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Richard Mouw. While it sometimes comes with the bite of critique, the Cultural Liturgies project—including this volume—has always been offered in the spirit of an "assist" (something I learned by playing from the blue line as a defenseman for fifteen years of my life).

The citizen of the city of God, Augustine emphasizes, will always find herself thrown into a situation of being a resident alien in some outpost of the earthly city. Citizens of the heavenly city, Augustine tells us, lead "what we may call a life of captivity in this earthly city as in a foreign land, although it has already received the promise of redemption, and the gift of the Spirit

as a kind of pledge of it.”<sup>1</sup> This demands neither a stance that is positive or sanguine vis-à-vis the earthly city nor a posture that is fundamentally dismissive with respect to political society. Rather, the first political impetus is one of calculated ambivalence and circumspection tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good. The heavenly city on this pilgrimage, Augustine continues, “does not hesitate to obey the laws of the earthly city by which those things which are designed for the support of this mortal life are regulated; and the purpose of this obedience is that, since this mortal condition is shared by both cities, a harmony may be preserved between them in things that are relevant to this condition.”<sup>2</sup> It’s not just a question of *whether* to be “resident aliens,” but how.

I offer *Awaiting the King* as a foray into thinking about the *how*. As such, this book is most concerned with the cultivation of a posture, not the recommendation of specific policies. While the church has spent a generation wrangling about what views we hold and what positions we should advance, we have lost our footing, slouching toward relevance or digging in our heels in defense. In the meantime, we’ve ceded our imaginations to the earthly city and forgotten the posture that should characterize citizens of the heavenly city. To worship Christ the King is to be a people with a kingdom-oriented stance, which will sometimes look aloof and will at other times pitch us into the fray. The posture of heavenly citizenship is a posture of uplift, tethered by hope to a coming King. As Paul reminds us, it is those whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20) who are called to shine like stars in the sky (2:15). *Awaiting the King* is an exercise in posture correction: part diagnosis and part prescription, it is, I hope, a way of reframing the liturgical heritage of the church as a resource for the Spirit to shape a peculiar people for the common good.

1. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 19.17.

2. *Ibid.*

## Acknowledgments

This book has been so long in the making I can't possibly hope to remember all of my debts. Let me name just a few of the most obvious.

In many ways, this book is the culmination of a trajectory that started with gentle pushback from my friend Hans Boersma at a critical juncture. I'm grateful to him for his work and charitable challenge; he has been a valued dialogue partner over the years. I have also been challenged and influenced by the work of Peter Leithart in ways that my footnotes don't do justice to.

Some of these ideas were field-tested in graduate seminars on Augustine, political theology, and Oliver O'Donovan's corpus at Trinity College of the University of Toronto and Calvin Theological Seminary. I'm grateful to Dean David Neelands for my appointment at Trinity and his flexibility in allowing me to offer experimental courses. I'm grateful to students in these seminars for their serious engagement with texts and ideas, and for the questions they posed that helped me hone my own thinking. No doubt I could have learned still more from them.

Pieces of this have been presented in a number of different contexts, but several opportunities deserve special mention. The invitation to be scholar-in-residence at Union University in 2015 provided a venue to articulate the core ideas here over the course of four public lectures. I'm grateful to Scott Huelin for the invitation and to the Union community for their kind hospitality during my week in Jackson, Tennessee. Thanks, also, to the small cadre of students who met for thoughtful, intense discussion after each lecture. The Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary provided another chance to field-test my analysis and argument in a very different context. My thanks to President Mark Labberton and (then) Dean Joel Green for the opportunity. I'm also grateful to those who participated in a seminar called "Cultivating

Faithful Citizens” at Calvin College in the summer of 2016, especially my codirector, Kevin DenDulk, and our guest scholars, Jonathan Chaplin, John Inazu, and Kristen Deede Johnson. That week of conversation helped crystallize a number of ideas below. Finally, chapter 4 was originally delivered as the annual Bavinck Lecture at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen in the Netherlands, where Deanna and I enjoyed both lovely hospitality and lively conversation with faculty and graduate students. Kampen has clearly emerged as one of the most dynamic places for Neocalvinist reflection today.

In the final stage of my work on the book, several friends and colleagues took time out of their busy schedules to read a complete draft of the book and offer their candid, incisive, and helpful comments. A special thank-you to Brian Dijkema, Matthew Kaemingk, Micah Watson, and Bruce Ashford for helping me in this way and being patient with my stubbornness where I didn’t take their advice.

There are important reasons why Calvin College continues to be my intellectual home. I owe thanks to those families who made it possible for me to hold the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology and Worldview, which has afforded me the time for sustained writing and reflection. Thanks, also, to my colleagues in the philosophy department for giving me a long leash.

My friends at Baker Publishing Group were invested in this project from the beginning, open to dreaming with me as I took an idea for one book and turned it into a trilogy. The Cultural Liturgies project has taken up a decade of my life from conception to realization, and with the publication of this final volume I am both humbled and grateful. The folks at Baker Academic have been unfailing champions and supporters, and I feel like we’ve also grown together through this experience. A special thanks to my friend and editor Bob Hosack, but thanks as well to the entire team of editors, designers, and marketers who do such good work for the sake of Christian intellectual witness. I look forward to many more years together, Lord willing.

I’ve dedicated this volume to my friends and colleagues at Cardus, a think tank in Hamilton, Ontario, of which I am a senior fellow and for which I edit *Comment* magazine. Cardus devotes itself to “the renewal of North American social architecture,” drawing on the resources of “two thousand years of Christian social thought.” That, I hope, is also a succinct description of what this book hopes to do. My association with Cardus has been energizing and lifegiving. I am especially grateful for the way they have also received Deanna as part of the community. I have found there a circle of comrades and a fellowship of Christians alongside whom I’m happy to labor for kingdom come.

As always, my family continues to be an incalculable means of grace, a tiny little outpost of the kingdom where I am constantly reminded of the reality of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love.

This book carries some of the wonderful aroma of beans roasting at Ferris Coffee & Nut, whose hospitable staff inducted me into the delights of pour-over coffee and made room for countless afternoons of writing. I'm grateful to have a "third place" like this. The soundtrack I listened to while writing there is eclectic to say the least: Radiohead's *Kid A*, Sandra McCracken's *Psalms*, Jason Isbell's stellar album *Something More Than Free*, Coltrane's *Love Supreme*, and way more Bonobo and Explosions in the Sky than you might have guessed.



Some of the material in this book previously appeared, in different form, in *Comment* magazine, *Books & Culture*, and *Calvin Theological Journal*. It also draws from my contributions to two books: *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?*, edited by Lieven Boeve, Mathijs Lamberigts, and Martin Wisse (Peeters, 2009), and *Becoming a Pastor Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership*, edited by Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand (InterVarsity, 2016). I'm grateful to the editors and publishers for permission to use that work here.

# Introduction

## LITURGICAL POLITICS: REFORMING PUBLIC THEOLOGY



### **Picturing Political Liturgies: Opening Exercises**

In her nineteenth year, Shonda would finally participate in a much-anticipated rite of passage at Trinity Reformed Church: her first election. Shonda would enter the church—which had long served as a polling place for this urban neighborhood—on a crisp Tuesday evening in early November to exercise her sacred duty as a citizen. She would be given the opportunity to vote, and this year was particularly intense. She would be asked to cast a vote for leaders at almost every level of government: in the city, in her state, in federal congress, and even for president. Her parents accompanied her with encouragement and excitement. As longtime activists in the city, serving on school boards and community foundations, knocking on doors for candidates and hosting neighborhood block parties, Shonda's parents had modeled for her a life of public service and engagement. In some sense, her whole life was a preparation to realize this responsibility—an opportunity that subjects of tyrants around the world could only dream of.

Of course, like most rites of passage, this was more an event than a ritual—a sporadic, though momentous, episode rather than a habitual rhythm. And yet all sorts of rituals had prepared Shonda for this moment. The opening exercises of her schooling had been a litany aimed toward this act, a daily rite in which she pledged allegiance to a flag and a republic. Hundreds of football games and soccer matches had commenced with a hymn to the same republic, rehearsing in song a story, a veritable mythology, about the founding of a nation wrapped up in the iconic symbol of a flag



whose colors and stars were a ubiquitous presence in her life. The story about this nation had been a consistent frame for the emergence of her own story, and this act, tonight, was in some sense the realization of her identity: a citizen.

But there was surely an irony here, since this was hardly the first time Shonda had visited Trinity Church. Indeed, she had haunted these halls since she was a child, accompanied through the door by her parents. Eighteen years ago, after she was born, they would have walked through these same doors, as they'd done almost every Sunday since. But on Sundays, instead of heading to the basement, they would proceed to the sanctuary. And on that day so many years ago, they had brought a tiny Shonda wrapped in a shining white baptismal gown, adorned like a princess. Her parents had been asked another question about allegiance: "Who is your Lord and Savior?" "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior," they had replied—a confession that has made every emperor anxious since Caesar pretended to be lord (*kyrios*). Presenting her to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the minister had spoken a powerful truth over squirming Shonda.

Shonda,  
for you Jesus came into the world;  
for you he died and conquered death;  
all this he did for you, little one,  
though you know nothing of it as yet.  
We love because God first loved us.

And with Shonda's staccato whimpers waiting to burst into a cry, the pastor then declared:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only King and Head of the Church,  
these sisters and brothers are now  
received into the visible membership of the holy catholic Church,  
engaged to confess Christ and  
to be God's faithful servants until life's end.

Perhaps somehow the words had slid over without the force of their political echo being felt ("the only King"). But on this November night, as Shonda was in the nondescript fellowship hall charged with political significance, she heard anew the words that had been spoken over her and the congregation almost every Sunday at the beginning of the service—a benediction she had heard so many times she could recite it from memory, another declaration that had seeped into her unconscious and was now bubbling up from an unexpected angle:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and  
from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faith-

ful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.  
(Rev. 1:4–5)

And in that moment before passing through the curtain of the polling booth, Shonda realized that every Sunday had been a political assembly, every worship service a civic rite. And while she enthusiastically pulled the lever to exercise the privilege of national citizenship, she did so now with a kind of sanctified ambivalence, realizing that every president was ruled by a King she'd known—and been known by—her entire life.



### A Parable for Public Life: *The Postman*

There is something political at stake in our worship and something religious at stake in our politics. And yet we are made for life in common; we are, as Aristotle said, “political animals.” So there is something creaturely—and good—about political life, our life in common. But that might also be why politics is prone to be something more. A visual parable of this dynamic might help motivate our inquiry.

You won't remember the film; it's a forgettable movie—something Kevin Costner did in the doldrums of his *Waterworld* phase (Gene Siskel called it *Dances with Myself*). It is schmaltzy, sentimental, and indulgent. It even features rocker Tom Petty in a performance that pretty much confirms why you never saw him in another movie. But embedded in all of that is a sort of parable that invites us to ask some important questions about our common life, our shared institutions, even our craving for government.

There's something about apocalyptic scenarios that crystallizes what matters. The catastrophe winnows us down to the state of nature, strips us of our civilizational accoutrements. We don't know what we miss until all is lost.<sup>1</sup> In *The Postman*, some sort of vaguely atomic disaster has eviscerated the accomplishments of centuries. Cars sit derelict while people travel on horseback; humans once again become hunter-gatherers whose days are consumed simply with the tasks of survival. It is a steampunk world. Significantly, most of the institutions that constituted both the government and the market have dissolved, leaving an anarchic vacuum filled by the fascism (and racism) of the Holnists, a marauding clan led by the Napoleonic General Bethlehem.

1. This is surely what is so focusing about the scenario in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, a world in which humanity is reduced to bare life, where even the scaffolding of civilization has toppled and all that's left are the resources of prior formation (or lack thereof). We will return to *The Road* in chap. 2.

Through this world wanders our protagonist, a nameless drifter who is a thespian-errant, staging snippets of Shakespeare in exchange for soup and shelter.<sup>2</sup> But while he is happy to play the part of a soldier, dueling with his mule Bill, our drifter is no revolutionary. That would require him to care for someone or something other than himself! When the Holnist army descends on a village and extorts tribute, they see the drifter trying to slink away and accost him. “I’m not with these people,” he pleads. “I’m just passing through.” He is not interested in solidarity; he prefers his solitary independence.

This all changes, despite his preferences. One night, on the run as a fugitive from Bethlehem’s clan, the drifter seeks shelter in an abandoned vehicle. Soaked to the bone, he shivers beside the skeletal remains of its driver and is delighted to find a lighter and a flask—both sources of warmth—and then looks longingly at the dry clothing the skeleton possesses. The drifting fugitive greedily claims them for himself and then realizes: the vehicle is a mail truck; the clothing is a postal uniform. By the light of a small fire, he begins to entertain himself with the undelivered letters in the cab and is overwhelmed by nostalgia: these banalities are a testament to an entire social system that has been lost. He recalls a civilizational institution that is the very embodiment of trust and hope—in which little Jimmy could write a note to his grandpa, tell him about his lost tooth, seal it in an envelope, and trust the news would reach a grandpa he couldn’t see. He is holding the relics of a communicative institution that made possible a kind of extended communion.

Our drifter has clothed himself in the postal uniform as a matter of mere expediency and self-interest: he needs dry clothes. But, ever the thespian, he’s not above leveraging its symbolism and power to score a warm bath, a soft bed, and a meal or two. So when he wanders up to the gates of Pineview, Oregon, he improvises a new character: he is there as a representative of the (fictional) “restored United States government.” Carrying his leather satchel filled with letters (and even the junk mail we thought no one would miss), his new character dangerously plies the hopes of a hungry people. “We’re delivering old stockpiles,” he says, “but I’ll deliver all new correspondence.” Before he leaves Pineview, he is inundated with new mail. Even the skeptical sheriff can’t resist the hope.

What the drifter doesn’t realize is that, while he thought he could just put on a costume and pretend, he has actually clothed himself in the vestments of a civilization. The remainder of the film is the story of how he learns to live into that stolen uniform. The vestments come with a significance he can’t

2. While it is Shakespeare who is constantly evoked in the movie, Don Quixote’s shadow looms across this whole story.

control. He is now the Postman. He will henceforth embody the memory and vision of a *nation*, a mode of community and solidarity that these former citizens crave. The postal service represents a network of communication that both assumes and creates a community that exceeds the self, is wider than family, and outstrips the tribe and the village—a kind of community that requires solidarity beyond blood and familiarity. Indeed, there is something altruistic in the endeavor—a concern that transcends self-regard. And people are immediately willing to sign up for this project of self-transcendence.<sup>3</sup> This is foreshadowed in a scene (that is, granted, just a bit too obvious) where a young man, Ford Lincoln Mercury, after being sworn in as a carrier, confesses: “I’d die to get a letter through.”<sup>4</sup>

Which is why this cinematic parable also illustrates the dark, perverted underbelly of this deep human craving for solidarity. It’s not long before we see the specter of nationalism and the shadow side of the political, the ways in which the political is often not content to be penultimate but rather slides toward its own kind of civil religion. Why does being “willing to die” for an ideal so quickly devolve into being willing to *kill* for it?<sup>5</sup> Soon the postal service is militarized and the resistance fighters devolve into their own reign of terror, fighting back with Holnist weapons of massacre, terror, and intimidation. In a final battle of machismo, the Postman makes his confession: “I believe in the United States of America!” This is supposed to be an accomplishment—the self-interested drifter now *believes* in something bigger than himself. But be careful what you believe in; not all credos are created equal. Because the real question is, what do you *love*?

*The Postman* is a parable precisely because it pushes us to ask some fundamental questions about who we are, what we want, and what we hope for.

3. The Postman himself takes a while to embrace this self-transcendence. His habits of self-regard are well developed. When he is injured during another flight from the Holnists and he and Abby, a romantic companion, take up residence in a secluded cabin, he is content to remain in bed, hide from the world, and be served—until Abby falls in the river and he dashes to save her. Concern for Abby pulls him out of himself again: love draws him out. But he still seems quite content to remain in the secluded retreat of the cabin—which is why, come spring, Abby has to burn down the cabin to propel him back toward civilization. Upon his return, he finds that the postal service is now bigger than the Postman: the system has a life of its own.

4. While at times a bit ham-fisted, a persistent critique of racism develops in the film: the ugliness of the Holnists’ ethnic ideology is contrasted with the black leadership of the restored postal service. The (still fictional) “restored United States of America” is realizing promises the original never kept.

5. An irony noted in U2’s “Peace on Earth”: “You become the monster so the monster will not break you.” Cf. William Cavanaugh’s critical discussion in “Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State Is Not the Keeper of the Common Good,” *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 243–74.

Indeed, it presses us to ask a question before these questions: What is this “we”?<sup>6</sup> What are the boundaries and limits and lineaments of any sense of “us”? Do we belong to more than one “we”? How do we forge a “we” that doesn’t dissolve “me”? And where do we find the will to build up an “us” that counters our predilections for self-preservation? (Would we have the will to *start* what we take for granted today?) A Christian political theology must articulate one more crucial question: In what ways—and to what extent—can the “peculiar people” that is the church live *in common* with citizens of the earthly city? In short, the film implicitly raises questions I want to consider in this book—questions about the common good, the role of government, the gift of solidarity, and the tensions inherent in the good work of statecraft.

Questions about the possibility and limits of human solidarity—which I’m suggesting are the fundamental questions of a political theology—lead us back to the animating core of the Cultural Liturgies project: philosophical anthropology. Or, conversely, a philosophical anthropology has to generate an account of solidarity and sociality. Even if solidarity is called for by our very nature as creatures, its realization is always a kind of accomplishment.

Every political theory assumes an anthropology, and every anthropology underwrites some political trajectory. If we are merely thinking things, or consuming animals, then our autonomy and independence are prior to any “we,” in which case the social will be a kind of grand fiction and noble lie, a derivative, secondary, “unnatural” invention.<sup>7</sup> Instead of laboring in solidarity, moving in common toward a shared *telos*, we relate only as competitors. In a prescient article that argues for a theology of “commonness” rooted in the incarnation, Willie James Jennings notes that the postmodern dissolution of the subject throws us back into a kind of state of nature. In the name of the “emancipation” of the subject, we are all unhooked from any common humanity. Instead we get varying cautionary cries of “Don’t tread on me!” Jennings cites Jean-François Lyotard: “Contemporary society no longer speaks of fraternity at all, whether Christian or republican. It only speaks of the sharing of the wealth and benefits of ‘development.’ Anything is permissible, within the limits of *what is defined* as distributive justice. We owe nothing other than services, and only among ourselves. We are socio-economic partners in a very large business, that of development.”<sup>8</sup> A just and rightly ordered desire to be emancipated from oppression becomes an

6. For a powerful, dystopian consideration of collectivist identity, see Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Natasha Randall (1921; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2006).

7. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), chap. 1.

8. Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul German (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 161, quoted in Willie James Jennings, “He Became

overwrought penchant to be liberated from every other, from the obligations of human community, from anything that impinges on the project of what David Brooks calls “The Big Me.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, Jennings points to the anthropology implicit in the doctrine of the incarnation as a nuanced picture of human solidarity, a forge for commonness.<sup>10</sup> Instead of appealing to some generic, abstract “humanity,” Jennings—following in the wake of Irenaeus and Athanasius<sup>11</sup>—points to the concrete body of the Jewish Jesus as liberator. “From Irenaeus,” Jennings remarks, “we learn that whenever the desire for emancipation is separated from the reality of the incarnation, Jesus’ body becomes merely a fleeting liberating *form* while the desire for freedom becomes primary and eternal.”<sup>12</sup> When we contrast Athanasius with Arius, we see that their difference has to do with either “a humanity saved and liberated by the actual hands of God and thus joined together in the body of Jesus or a humanity that is yet to be liberated by the work of its own hands and is thus joined together only by the *needed work* of liberation itself.”<sup>13</sup> Jennings looks to the resurrection of Jesus to underwrite solidarity that refuses “the false universal of a common humanity as well as the abstract longing for human liberation.”<sup>14</sup> This is found, he counsels, “in an incarnational view of emancipation that proceeds from baptism and moves toward a kind of intellectual revival,” for “neither the supporters of the humanism(s)

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Truly Human’: Incarnation, Emancipation, and Authentic Humanity,” *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 243.

9. David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), chap. 10.

10. Jennings notes that Christian discourse can become captive to this disordered desire for emancipation too: “For many of us, Christian identity no longer gives us sight of our humanity. Instead, Christian identity is pressed into the service of so many important causes for emancipation—emancipation, that is, ‘being freed’ now understood as *the* defining point of our humanity. And there is much to be celebrated in this current state of affairs, not the least of which is recognizing that Christian faith *is* life-affirming and liberating. However, Christian faith ordered by the desire for freedom often becomes misguided faith, because such faith cannot really discern the humanity it wishes to free. Having moved away from the abstract idea of humanity of earlier generations, we find ourselves caught by belief in abstract freedom” (“He Became Truly Human,” 244). I will return in chap. 6 below to Jennings’s more developed discussion of these matters in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

11. See J. Kameron Carter’s discussion of Irenaeus in *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11–36.

12. Jennings, “He Became Truly Human,” 246.

13. *Ibid.*, 247. He continues a little later: “Those who look to Jesus as only a radical model for emancipation conceal a perverted triumphalism: while they want real social and political change, their plans for such change will continue no matter what becomes of Jesus. . . . There is something terribly tragic about theologians, Christian philosophers, and like-minded intellectuals who have simply joined their voices to the prevailing emancipatory critiques” (251–52).

14. *Ibid.*, 253.

nor the post-modern emancipationists have been sufficiently haunted by that strange call to death signified by the biblical practice of baptism.”<sup>15</sup> Solidarity points to liturgy. And insofar as solidarity is at once the ground and goal of the political, the political requires us to consider the liturgical.

### Public Theology in a Liturgical Mode

My goal in this book is twofold. I want to work out the implications of a “liturgical” theology of culture for how we imagine and envision political engagement. But in doing so, I also hope to offer an alternative paradigm that moves us beyond contemporary debates in political theology—or at least reframes the questions in view *of*, and with a view *to*, practice. It’s in this sense that I hope to “reform” Reformed public theology, offering something of an “assist” to the tradition in order to articulate what I hope, in the end, is a catholic proposal.<sup>16</sup>

As I see it, our current paradigms have at least two problems. First, we tend to think of Christianity and politics in largely “spatialized” terms. So the questions are focused on how to relate the “spheres” of church and state, for example; or how to move between the jurisdictions of two kingdoms; or how to create an “alternative” *polis* that eludes the clutches of liberalism. Across different theological streams that counsel quite different modes of Christian engagement with (or distance from) politics, we can nonetheless discern a common assumption that “the political” is a kind of realm, a turf, a territory. In this sense we spatialize political theology and reduce it to boundary management and border patrols.

Second, we tend to assume that citizens (i.e., political agents) are “rational actors” of the sort economists like to dream of—decision-making machines whose actions are the outcome of conscious deliberation rooted in beliefs and ideas.<sup>17</sup> We picture citizens striding into the proverbial public square as

15. *Ibid.*, 251–52.

16. I must note up front that my proposal and argument in this book largely assume—and build on—a Reformed model of public theology articulated in the work of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Herman Dooyeweerd, and their heirs in our own time (especially Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Mouw, and Jonathan Chaplin). This book, therefore, depends on—or at least assumes—fundamental arguments and articulations I have made elsewhere, especially in my chapter “The Reformed (Transformationist) View,” in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 139–62. While my proposals for *reforming* Reformed public theology will involve critique, those criticisms are offered in the spirit of reform, with the goal of faithfully extending and revising this tradition. They in no way constitute a dismissal. I hope readers will keep this proviso in mind all the way to the end.

17. Cf. discussions of philosophy of action in James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 31–41. It is precisely this reductionistic picture of humans as “Econs” that is criticized by the behavioral

thinking things who vote—both on the basis of their “beliefs” and as a way to *express* those beliefs (don’t ask me how a *res cogitans* pulls those levers in the polling booth). The political is thus pictured as an arena in which we express our beliefs, legislate what we know, and codify laws to be disseminated. In this way we *rationalize* politics.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, many of our debates—and our culture wars—tend toward a kind of proceduralism or formalism about who or what can be admitted to “the political,” which we in turn conceive of as a space for the expression of beliefs and ideas. So, for example, against those who would police admission to political discourse, we fight for the right to bring “our” beliefs and ideas into the public square. “The political” is thereby reduced to the rules and procedures that govern a “space” where we swap ideas and beliefs.

But our “political” lives are not sequestered to a particular sphere. The political is not a square with discernible gates.<sup>19</sup> While we often speak of the public “square,” the metaphor is antiquated and unhelpful. There’s no square there. And it certainly isn’t the case that “the political” is restricted to our capitols, legislatures, and polling booths. The political is not synonymous with, or reducible to, the realm of “government,” even if there is significant overlap.

The political is less a space and more a way of life; the political is less a realm and more of a *project*. When we reduce the political through this twofold spatialization and rationalization, what is lost and forgotten is an appreciation for the way the *polis* is a *formative* community of solidarity and the fact that political participation requires and assumes just such formation—a citizenry with habits and practices for living in common and toward a certain end, oriented toward a *telos*. Even if this Aristotelian (and Augustinian) intuition has been buried by the rationalistic proceduralism of modern liberalism, that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.<sup>20</sup> Political animals are *made*, not born.<sup>21</sup>

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economist Richard Thaler. For a summary account, see Thaler, *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioural Economics* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

18. For a deconstruction of this kind of “rational actor” picture of politics, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

19. Nor is it a stage that we can be either “on” or “off” (like when I’ve spoken in places where the microphone becomes hot as soon as I step on stage and is muted as soon as I step off). Politics bleeds across our neat and tidy boundaries.

20. “Liberalism” in this argument refers to a particular sort of political theory and not the policy leanings of particular parties. On this more technical use of the term, for example, both the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States fall quite obviously within the legacy of “liberalism.”

21. And even if we (rightly) want to argue that human beings are “by nature” political animals, that is still a claim about a capacity that requires cultivation and training—and which can be misformed.



This is why our political theologies need to worry less about policing boundaries and securing a platform for expressing our beliefs and instead carefully consider the ways that political life is bound up with the formation of habits and desires that make us who we are. What if we aren't fundamentally "thinking things" who enter the "space" of politics with ideas to get off our chests? What if we are creatures of craving, defined by our desires, who make our way in the world governed by what we long for? And what if the political is not just some procedural gambit to manage our mundane affairs but an expression of a creational desire and need, a structural feature of creaturely life that signals something about the sociality of human nature? What if politics, as John von Heyking puts it (commenting on Augustine), is really about "longing in the world"?<sup>22</sup>

Politics, then, both requires formation and forms us. The political is more like a repertoire of rites than a "space" for expressing ideas. Laws, then, are not just boundary markers; they are social nudges that make us a certain kind of people. Institutions are not just abstract placeholders for various functions; they are incubators of habituation that make us a certain kind of people—indeed, they forge the very notion of an "us." If politics is habit forming, it is also *love* shaping, which means that we are on the terrain of liturgy.<sup>23</sup>

When we recover an appreciation of politics as a repertoire of formative rites—as a nexus of habit-forming practices that not only govern us but also form us—then we will remember that politics is bound up with matters of virtue.<sup>24</sup> And truly appreciating the dynamics of virtue requires recovering a sense of teleology, a purview on the political that takes into account the *ends* we are pursuing, the vision of the good that animates our collaboration and common life.<sup>25</sup> What unites a "people," an "us," is a project, something we're

22. John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

23. Recall that in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), we defined liturgies as "rituals of ultimate concern" that "are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations" (86). Since our identity is rooted in desire/love, liturgies are love-shaping practices "that function as pedagogies of ultimate desire" (87).

24. This should not be confused with saying, of course, that *only* politics is bound up with virtue. Indeed, much of my argument that follows will relativize the significance of what we might call "electoral politics" when we grapple with the challenges of the *polis*. In this sense, I am in sympathy with James Davison Hunter's critique of a narrow politico-centrism that has too often dominated evangelical Protestant concepts of cultural influence. See Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 101–49.

25. Such a teleology, we'll discuss below, is precisely what is precluded by the modern liberal view of the self as autonomous. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

after together. We collaborate in a common life insofar as we find goods to pursue in common; and we establish institutions, systems, and rhythms that reinforce the pursuit of those goods. Thus a liturgical account of the political not only analyzes the formative power of our public rites; it also (finally) requires that we zoom in and get more specific about the different visions of the good that animate the many *poleis* we inhabit.

For Christian thought, zooming out to take account of teleology is intimately bound up with an eschatology. Our teleology *is* an eschatology: a hope for kingdom come that arrives by the grace of providence and doesn't arrive without the return of the risen King. And this changes everything. A teleology that is at once an eschatology will be countercultural to every political pretension that assumes either a Whiggish confidence in human ingenuity and progress or alarmist counsels of despair. But precisely because Christian eschatology is a teleology of *hope*, it will also run counter to cynical political ideologies of despair that reduce our common life to machinations of power and domination. Furthermore, a Christian political theology attuned to eschatology will run counter to a kind of postmillennial progressivism to which the so-called justice generation sometimes seems prone (the "Arian" option described by Jennings above).

But if Christian hope reframes the political in light of eternity, we might say that Christian faith resituates the political in light of creation. If eschatology "relativizes" the political from above and beyond, a biblical theology of creation and culture relativizes the political from below, so to speak. This is why my quarry is not just a *political* theology but more broadly what I'd call a *public* theology. I want to encourage us to overcome a narrow fixation on certain modes of electoral politics and realize that much of what constitutes the life of the *polis* is modes of "life in common" that fall outside the narrow interests of state and government—and certainly well beyond the purview of the cable news fixation on presidential politics.<sup>26</sup> So a Christian account of our shared social-economic-political life might be described more properly as a "public" theology—an account of how to live in common with neighbors who don't believe what we believe, don't love what we love, don't hope for what we await. The institutions of government are a part of that life in

26. Drawing on Gene Healy's phrase, Ross Douthat names this "cult of the presidency" as a persistent political temptation. "To disciples of this cult, the president *is* the government: 'He is a soul nourisher,' Healy writes, 'a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise'" (Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* [New York: Free Press, 2012], 269, citing Healy, "The Cult of the Presidency," *Reason* [June 2008]). I hope one takeaway from this book will be an appreciation for the many layers and expressions of "the political" that are both beyond our fixation on federal electoral politics and not infected by partisanship.

common, but only a slice of a much wider web of institutions and practices that govern our common life. We might say that it is not only government that governs, or conversely, that the state is not the only—or even the most primordial—mode of solidarity.

Bernd Wannewetsch makes a similar point in his important work *Political Worship*. While in some contexts and epochs political theology might have to address totalizing political regimes, in the late modern era of liberalism it is “society” that pretends to be “total.” Society is now a “super-system” that at once absorbs and marginalizes the state and private life, “not least because of the triumphal march of the mass media” and “an impersonal dictatorship of ‘the crowd.’”<sup>27</sup> Thus “the Church would be wrong if it were to conclude from its experiences with the totalitarian state that the critical power of its own public should be always primarily directed to the public of the State” because, today, this critique “must be levelled (at least in the political community of the West) against the total claim of *society*, which has long since also claimed the public of the State.”<sup>28</sup> If the church is a “public”<sup>29</sup> that stands, in some sense, *counter* to the pretensions of the earthly *polis*, we can’t narrowly mistake this as a critique targeted only at the state because, in the current configuration of globalized capitalism, the state has in many ways been trumped by the forces of the market and society. Wannewetsch points out that in Western societies—and globalized societies more and more—the economy functions as a “structure-building force” that shapes everything. The market now constitutes “the inner logic” of society itself: the dynamics of society are “moulded by the laws of the market: as a contest between participants competing for an increase of their shares.”<sup>30</sup> This coupling of market forces and the crowd’s demand for publicity means that everyone dreams of monetizing their Instagram feed. And *that* effectively becomes the ethos of a society. Thus a “political” theology is not narrowly an account

27. Bernd Wannewetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 207–8.

28. *Ibid.*, 238.

29. See Reinhard Hütter’s important discussion of the “church as public” in *Bound to Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19–42. Hütter points out that because of the pretensions of the earthly city in modernity, “a ‘political theology’ that attempts to ‘politicize’ the church can only and unavoidably deepen the church’s irrelevance and undermine the church’s public (political) nature by submitting and reconditioning the church according to the *saeculum*’s understanding of itself as the ultimate and normative public” (32). Instead of “politicizing” the church, we need to recover the sense in which it is a “public”—following Hannah Arendt—that is “defined by a particular telos, circumscribed by constitutive practices, and underwritten by normative convictions” (31). This *oikonomia* finds expression in the church’s practices and disciplines (35–37).

30. Wannewetsch, *Political Worship*, 241.

of the state or governmentality but rather a theological account of the *polis* that is “society.” It is in this sense that I would describe our project here as a “public” theology, and it is because of this that our “political” theology will range into nongovernmental environs in order to do justice to the formative ethos of late modern society.

In this vein, I could nuance my earlier point about the unhelpful ways we have spatialized politics. Following John Milbank, we could say the problem is a *simple* spatialization rather than a rich, variegated, “gothic” account of our common life as a “*complex* space.”<sup>31</sup> A Christian public theology, rooted in a creational theology and incarnational ontology, will appreciate the many layers and folds and features of a flourishing society—an affirmation of what we now describe as “civil” society, a network of institutions and communities beyond the state that are integral to its flourishing. Milbank likens the complexity of such a society to the richness of a gothic cathedral: “a building which can be endlessly added to, either extensively through new additions, or intensively through the filling in of detail. This condition embodies constant recognition of imperfection, of the fragmentary and therefore always-already ‘ruined’ character of the gothic structure, which, as John Ruskin argued, expresses the Christian imperative of straining for the ultimate at the risk of thereby more comprehensively exhibiting one’s finite and fallen insufficiency.”<sup>32</sup>

### A Liturgical Lens on the Political

My task, then, is to look at the political (broadly construed) through the lens of liturgy. What difference will it make for our theological reflection on politics if we begin from the assumption that the same human beings who are by nature *zōon politikon* (“political animals”) are also *homo adorans* (“liturgical animals”)? What if citizens are not just thinkers or believers but *lovers*? How will our analysis of political institutions look different if we attend to them as incubators of love-shaping practices, not merely governing us but forming what we love? How will our political engagement change if we are not only looking for permission to express our “views” in the political sphere but actually hoping to shape the ethos of a nation, a state, a municipality to foster a way of life that bends toward shalom? How will our expectations of politics change if our imagination is disciplined by an eschatological vision?

31. See Milbank’s dense but incisive essay “On Complex Space,” in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 268–92.

32. *Ibid.*, 276. We will return to these themes in a discussion of subsidiarity in chap. 3.

How might our enthusiastic activism be tempered if we begin to consider the assumptions carried in the practices of protest and rites of revolution?

My goal is to make things more complex, not more simple. These are knotty realities, and our theoretical and theological accounts should be sufficiently complex. So let me first note two implications of looking at the political through a liturgical lens.

### *Seeing the State as “Religious”*

As I’ve tried to show in *Desiring the Kingdom* and elsewhere,<sup>33</sup> once we move away from a rationalist or intellectual paradigm that equates religion with beliefs and worldviews and instead identify the religious with rituals of ultimacy (i.e., liturgies), then cultural institutions and practices that we might have previously thought neutral or benign are recognized as having a kind of religious force about them precisely because they aim to shape our loves. What makes them religious is not just that they are informed by beliefs and worldviews but that they have formative pretensions that are nothing short of liturgical. It shouldn’t be surprising when an institution that wants you to “pledge allegiance” is not happy with anything less than your heart.

In this case, a liturgical lens works like a cultural highlighter that draws our attention not just to the “laws of the land” or the decisions of supreme court justices but to the rites interwoven in our public life together—the rituals and liturgies that inculcate in us a national myth and habituate in us an unconscious allegiance to a particular vision of the good. When we undertake cultural analysis of the political through a liturgical lens, we will be attentive to the ways we are formed by the rites of democracy and the market, not just *informed* by their institutions. Indeed, we will notice that the rites of democratic liberalism are not only—or perhaps even primarily—managed by the state; rather, we’ll see an intricate web of liturgies, fostered by what Michael Hanby calls the “military-entertainment complex,”<sup>34</sup> that spill well beyond any delineated political “sphere.”

This is why I think we postmoderns have so much to learn from an ancient but prescient voice like Augustine. Indeed, in some small way, my project is to reprise Augustine’s liturgical analysis of the earthly city’s “civic theologies” in the context of late modern liberalism. This will be the focus of chapter 1,

33. See James K. A. Smith, “Secular Liturgies and the Prospects for a ‘Post-Secular’ Sociology of Religion,” in *The Post-Secular in Question*, ed. Philip Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 159–84.

34. Michael Hanby, “Democracy and Its Demons,” in *Augustine and Politics*, ed. John Doody, Kevin L. Hughes, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 129.

### To Think About: Renewing Social Architecture

Cardus, the Christian think tank of which I am a senior fellow, articulates its mission as “the renewal of North American social architecture,” drawing on two thousand years of Christian social thought. The mission suggests a helpful metaphor: the *polis* is held together by an architecture, which also means that the *polis* is designed, is made, and needs to be sustained. As architecture critic Rowan Moore puts it, “Architecture starts with desire on the part of its makers, whether for security, or grandeur, or shelter, or rootedness. Built, it influences the emotions of those who experience and use it, whose desires continue to shape and change it.”<sup>a</sup> The same is true of social architecture: we make the societies that make us.

But if we think of our common life together as the design and maintenance of a “social architecture,” it should also help us to remember how deeply *collaborative* this endeavor is. It is no accident, for example, that the 2012 Venice Biennale of Architecture focused on the theme of “Common Ground.” Architects have the luxury of being idealists only as long as their plans remain on the drafting table. As soon as they want to see something built, they are thrown into a web of obligations and partnerships that require creative compromise. As David Chipperfield notes in his introduction to the Biennale’s portfolio, “Architecture requires collaboration, and most importantly it is susceptible to the quality of this collaboration. It is difficult to think of another peaceful activity that draws on so many diverse contributions and expectations. It involves commercial forces and social vision; it must deal with the wishes of institutions and corporations and the needs and desires of individuals. Whether we articulate it or not, every major construction is an amazing testament of our ability to join forces and make something on behalf of others.”<sup>b</sup> The same is true of those who are called to contribute to the design, construction, and maintenance of our social architecture: by its very nature, such work requires solidarity, collaboration, and compromise even if, like Abraham, we are “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

a. Rowan Moore, *Why We Build* (London: Picador, 2012), 18.

b. David Chipperfield, introduction to *Common Ground: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Chipperfield, Kieran Long, and Shumi Bose (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2012), 14.

in which I’ll show that the politics of the earthly city is not content to remain penultimate.

### *Seeing the Church as “Political”*

If a liturgical lens highlights the religious (i.e., liturgical) aspects of “the state,” it equally highlights the political nature of the church, that the body of Christ is a kind of republic of the imagination, a body politic composed of those whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). The practices of the body of Christ inculcate in us a social imaginary, orienting us to a *telos* that is nothing

less than the kingdom of God. Worship is the “civics” of the city of God, habituating us as a people to desire the shalom that God desires for creation. The church is not a soul-rescue depot that leaves us to muddle through the regrettable earthly burden of “politics” in the meantime; the church is a body politic that invites us to imagine how politics could be otherwise. And we are sent from worship to be Christ’s image-bearers to and for our neighbors, which includes the ongoing creaturely stewardship and responsibility to order the social world in ways that are conducive to flourishing but particularly attentive to the vulnerable—the widows, orphans, and strangers in our midst. The regenerating and sanctifying power of the Spirit also nourishes a *political* will that engenders solidarity.<sup>35</sup>

This is why we can’t be satisfied with any kind of neat-and-tidy compartmentalization of the spiritual and the political, policing the jurisdictions between “the church” and “the state.” In some significant sense, this distinction is not simply a division of labor; it is a contest and rivalry. As Peter Leithart observes, “So long as the Church preaches the gospel and functions as a properly ‘political’ reality, a polity of her own, the kings of the earth have a problem on their hands. . . . As soon as the church appears, it becomes clear to any alert politician that worldly politics is no longer the only game in town. The introduction of the church into *any* city means that the city has a challenger within its walls.”<sup>36</sup> Even rumors of a rival king will send a Herod on a murderous rampage to quash the competition. There are always Hamans willing to rat out nonconformists who refuse to pledge allegiance to the emperor. And those like Joseph of Arimathea, “waiting for the kingdom of God,” will have the boldness to confront their Pilates (Mark 15:43). Unpacking the lineaments of this ecclesial polity and teasing out the substantive vision of the good carried in the practices of Christian worship will be the focus of chapter 2.

However, these two observations—that the state is religious and the church is political—do *not* entail mutual exclusivity or total antithesis, though I do think they encourage a kind of holy ambivalence about our relationship to the political, a sort of engaged but healthy distance rooted in our specifically eschatological hope, running counter to progressivist hubris, triumphalistic culture wars, and despairing cynicism. Instead, the discipleship of our political lives requires discernment about how exactly to negotiate the collaboration and tensions between the heavenly and earthly cities. That monumental task

35. “The primary task of political ethics for the Christian churches today must be looked for not so much in political influence in particular cases or sectors, as in regaining the position and function of the congregation in worship, where they can develop their political form of life in accordance with the gospel” (Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship*, 163).

36. Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), 136.

is the focus of chapters 3–6 and the book’s conclusion, from a number of different angles.

Holding both of these claims together without treating them as mutually exclusive—or concluding that we need to choose between the church and politics—invites us to add several layers of nuance and complexity that should inform our practice. I want to simply note these implications here and then explore them in more detail in subsequent chapters.

1. We need to recognize that “the political” is not synonymous with the earthly city’s particular instantiation of politics. In other words, we must resist the temptation to see the current configurations of the political as equivalent to “the political” as such. The earthly city does not have the corner, or the last word, on politics—which is precisely why we can labor, hope, and pray that the terrain of the political can be bent toward the kingdom of God. *This* is what we mean by a “Christendom” project (contrary to almost everything you’ve ever heard about Christendom). Christendom is a *missional* endeavor that labors in the hope that our political institutions can be bent, if ever so slightly, toward the coming kingdom of love. If you want to see what Christendom looks like, read Charles Marsh’s history of the civil rights movement, *The Beloved Community*.<sup>37</sup>
2. Not only should we hope and pray that our political institutions and practices might echo the coming kingdom; we should recognize that, in fact, it has already happened. This is why we can’t simply dismiss even political liberalism: to the contrary, we need to appreciate the ways liberalism itself lives on borrowed capital and is only possible because of the dent of the gospel and the formative effects of Christian practices on Western societies (a story we’ll rehearse with help from Charles Taylor and Oliver O’Donovan). Our stance toward liberal democracy is not only, or even fundamentally, antithetical.
3. Nonetheless, late-modern liberal democracy—as the default configuration of the earthly city today—is at the same time ultimately deficient and disordered, and often disorders our loves. So our political engagement requires not dismissal or permission or celebration but rather the hard, messy work of discernment in order to foster both ad hoc resistance to its ultimate pretensions and ad hoc opportunities to collaborate on penultimate ends.

37. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).



4. Finally, this liturgical lens on our political and public life should be an occasion for us to attend to our own assimilation, even provide resources to diagnose the source and cause of our capitulation to the earthly city. When we, armed with our “worldviews,” confidently march in to transform culture with our ideas and arguments, we all too often underestimate the extent to which our own loves have been captivated by the rites of the earthly city—and so, in the name of transforming culture, what we get is the assimilation of the church. Focusing on the intellectual artifacts of the earthly *polis*, we miss the formative power of its rituals. *This* is the inconvenient truth that is pressed upon us by the new black theology of Willie Jennings, J. Kameron Carter, and Brian Bantum, for example.<sup>38</sup> The church’s capitulation to ideologies of race will be a case study of our assimilation by earthly-city liturgies despite our best arguments and convictions.

Looming across this landscape is the giant shadow of St. Augustine, whose *City of God* is the animating source of my project, giving us the resources to diagnose our postmodern condition. He will help us name and distinguish the two aspects of our political cravings we see illustrated in *The Postman*: a good creaturely desire to build communities of cooperation beyond the comfort of kith and kin—to love our neighbors by building institutions for human flourishing—and also the fallen penchant to absolutize the penultimate, to confuse the political with the eternal. To be faithful citizens of the heavenly city is to learn how to actively wait, bearing witness to kingdom come.

38. Or as George Yancy puts it (in ways that intersect with the conceptual terrain of my *Imagining the Kingdom*), “Deep-seated racist emotive responses may form part of the white bodily repertoire, which has become calcified through quotidian modes of bodily transaction in a racial and racist world” (*Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008], 5).