

FAITH & ECONOMICS

NUMBER 46 ■ FALL 2005

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Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left: A Thinking Christian's Guide to Politics and Public Policy

D. Eric Schansberg. 2003. Greenville, SC: Alertness Books. ISBN: 0-9729754-5-4. \$20 (pbk).

Reviewed by Hadley T. Mitchell, Taylor University (IN).

Should Christians be involved in political issues? How ought Christians develop their own political theory within the context of scriptural admonitions? Schansberg's book is a well-thought through attempt to show what the Bible says about Christians, the church and its relationship with government.

The book's title is an allusion to God's admonition to the Israelites to follow His law and commands whole-heartedly and to live for God completely. In Deut 5:32 and nearly a dozen other passages, the Israelites were instructed not to "turn aside to the right or to the left" (NASB). Schansberg admittedly makes a "politically-applied pun" to address how Christians are to evaluate the political spectrum and the sundry agendas from both the political right and left. He presents a politically balanced view, critiquing both ends of the political spectrum. He calls his readers to develop a biblically based analysis of the role of the government. He asks whether Christians should depend upon the government to promote various agendas of the day.

There are three broad questions addressed in the book (p. 9). How should Christians respond when acted upon by the government? When should Christians seek government policy as a means to a religiously motivated end? Are some types of sinful behavior or the type of righteous behavior more appropriately addressed by government action than others? Structurally, this book is laid out in a very orderly manner. Schansberg begins with his analysis of what the Bible teaches regarding the role of the government. Then he treats the contrast between the theory and actual practice of government, recognizing that mankind's fallen nature affects any human organization. He further takes a chapter to establish that churches and believers must pursue godly goals with godly methods. He recognizes that persons on the religious right tend to be concerned that government should promote morality, while persons on the Christian left are more concerned with the government's addressing issues of economic justice. So he has three chapters, first addressing why Christians should not legislate morality. These are followed by three additional chapters addressing "Why and How Christians Should Legislate Justice." His approach is very balanced. Appropriately for an author admonishing

readers not to turn aside either to the right or to the left, he himself does not support either side over the other. Stylistically, the text is quite readable for the educated lay reader. Yet, for the person intending to dig more deeply into the subject, there are copious endnotes (112 pages of endnotes, compared with 305 pages of text), as well as a good bibliography.

The first question, how the church responds to the government, should be straight forward. Schansberg reminds us of the biblical admonition to honor and respect the government. Yet, he does not focus on the opportunity for individual Christians to become engaged in political activity. The individual Christian can and must have an important redemptive influence on the fallen world. If, as Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing,” then should not Christians seek to have part of their redemptive influence within government, be it in an elected office or as a civil servant? Because, as the church historically has correctly taught, people, having a sinful nature, tend towards evil conduct, the church must speak out, decrying not only the evils of society, but also of society’s government. He ignores the scriptural precedence either of John the Baptist’s crying out against Herod Antipas for marrying his brother’s wife or of Nathan rebuking David for the Bathsheba incident. *Federalist Paper #51* famously reminds us that “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”¹ But current judicial history shows that having a constitution alone is not sufficient; the church must resume its proper prophetic role, speaking against the evils in society, including rebuking faulty government actions or policies.

The second question, whether Christians should seek to make use of government policy for their own purposes, is one which Schansberg spends considerable time discussing. While he does not mention that several reformers, including John Knox in Scotland and Martin Luther in Germany, relied upon the civil governments to protect the nascent Protestant church against the established religious authorities, he does caution against the ills that emerged when civil authorities were used to suppress pagans and heretics. There is the danger of seeking external moral compliance while the church has ceased preaching against moral evils. Yet the appropriate societal transformation is the result of an inward spiritual transformation, not an external transformation of behavior.

The third question, whether some behavior is more appropriately addressed by government action, is an area where Christians tend to focus on personal biases. Some Christians are more concerned with the issues of poverty and income redistribution. Other Christians are more concerned

with moral behavior. This latter group wants the government to ban types of gambling, or restrict types of homosexual behavior, or other such moral concerns.

Schansberg is concerned with how churches have abdicated their charitable responsibility to the government, which led to the present welfare system. When the government takes over this responsibility, he shows, both government bureaucracy expands and the church diminishes its diaconal role to society. He provides a list of ten principles that Christians need to consider before the church becomes involved in the government. Regrettably, he does not necessarily address the issue of whether individual Christians can become involved. (It has been interesting to compare the quiet, but efficient, role of churches addressing the material needs of those affected by Hurricane Katrina with the delayed and bungled attempts of bureaucracy as the issue degenerated into mutual political finger pointing.)

Schansberg is properly concerned when the church tries to get the government to legislate morality. When the church seeks to get the government to ban, for example, homosexual marriages, is that thereby signaling either that the church has failed in its prophetic role to society or that the church prefers the state use its coercive powers rather than the church cry out against the moral evils of the day? Certainly, there are activities which the government must punish. Indeed, the state does not bear the sword in vain. But can that sword-bearing create the moral transformation formerly achieved through spiritual revivals? He is appropriately concerned that the church focus on using civil means to achieve its own spiritual ends of transforming society through the spread of the Gospel. He rightly reminds us that these civil attempts to transform the moral landscape are far too easily undone with the next election.

Schansberg sees too many individual Christians as either moving towards a religious left, and focusing on legislating justice (LJ), or gravitating towards a religious right, and espousing legislating morality (LM). He spends several chapters addressing each of these tendencies by turn. In each case, he gives a well-thought out case, well defended from scripture, encouraging Christians either from the religious left or the religious right to re-think their premises and to bring their political theory in subjection to a more consistently scriptural view.

In his criticism of LM, Schansberg rightly rebukes evangelical churches for trying to achieve through governmental and civil means the moral restructuring of society which is the responsibility of preaching the gospel and calling sinners to repent. He is aware of the theonomic tendency to

use legislation to achieve morality. Civil laws can only address outward behavior, and can never reach the deep recesses of the human heart. The moral transformation of society must come through the gospel preached and cannot be achieved through legislation alone.

In the area of LJ, Schansberg examines the biblical basis for a government-induced income redistribution. He shows that in the OT, individual believers were to be generous to the poor, e.g. through gleanings. But this redistributive aid for the poor was not to be achieved through government taxation or income subsidization. He is aware of the problem that government programs promote an idolatry of dependence upon the state (p. 204). Regrettably, some depend upon handouts from the government. Regrettably, also, others think that because the government has its welfare programs, individuals or churches no longer need shoulder any responsibility for helping those in need. He encourages, where the government does need to provide aid, the use of either the Catholic principle of ‘subsidiarity’ or the Kuyperian principle of sphere sovereignty. ‘Subsidiarity’ refers to the principle that the lowest level of government that can properly address an issue should be used. By Kuyperian sphere sovereignty is meant that certain social levels, such as the family or the church, have a degree of authority and responsibility that other levels, such as the state, may not abridge or assume. Thus, by sphere sovereignty, the state should not take over familial or ecclesiastical responsibilities. He also cites P. T. Bauer’s concern with wealth redistribution, that it causes the poor to become pre-occupied with other people’s wealth and thus politicians end up legislating envy and resentment.

Schansberg recognizes the dangers of attempting to use government coercion to create the political version of a virtuous society. Such coercion forgets that freedom is a pre-requisite for virtue. Thus the government cannot be the shortcut to a virtuous society. Indeed, there is the danger of using the government as a political messiah. But where public policy action is appropriate, he recommends four principles or criteria. First, the prospective goal must be godly. Second, ethical means to godly ends must be used. Third, the means to the godly ends must be appropriate. Fourth, the means to godly ends must be practical.

In his discussion of the law as teacher, by using civil law to instruct citizens in morality, Schansberg incorrectly applies Calvin’s third use of the law (instructing believers in righteous conduct). For Calvin, the law presupposes a moral transformation of the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit which internalizes God’s law on his heart (Jer. 31:31ff). But civil law is unable to do this.

Schansberg gives a very balanced, well-thought out position critiquing both sides of the political spectrum. This book is very helpful for those desiring to think through a biblical approach to politics. He acknowledges that the appropriate transformation of society results not from better public policy, but from spiritual renewal.

But his book could be enhanced with a richer understanding of natural law, either from a Thomistic or, preferably, from a Reformational perspective. The early magisterial leaders of the Protestant Reformation had a well-developed theory of natural law quite distinct from the Thomistic tradition. These Reformational thinkers held that this natural law, which has been made known to all people, is consistent with the law of God revealed to Moses on the mountain. Such thinkers as Samuel Rutherford held natural law to be the basis for civil law and thus the abolition of the absolute monarchy. The Protestant use of natural law continued until roughly 1750, when the term was equivocally taken over by Enlightenment thinkers, using it as originating from human reason rather than from divine origin. Christian thinkers from Thomas to Rutherford had emphasized that natural law was of divine origin. (Romans 2:14f was an important text used by these thinkers.) Natural law, which is called the “Tao” in C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, is essentially the idea that all persons have a God-given, objective moral understanding of right and wrong. Certainly, those persons who have rejected God have suppressed their knowledge of this natural law, as Romans 1 contends. But, an appeal to that natural law, or preferably the more complete revelation of God’s moral character would have avoided the temptation for Christian political theorists to turn either “to the right or to the left.” That view could well be reconsidered today.

Endnote

1 *The Federalist Papers*. 1998, p. 398ff.

References

- The Federalist Papers**. 1998. New York: Regnery Publishing, Inc.
Lewis, C. S. 1944. *The Abolition of Man*. London: Macmillan Publishing Company.
 _____. 1943. *Mere Christianity*. London: Simon & Schuster. ■