

Jesus, Political Wisdom, and Public Flourishing

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by Charles Strohmer

Senator Rick Santorum's controversial statement about President Obama's 'worldview,' which went viral in February, puzzled many news analysts. But it was clear to most evangelicals that Santorum had implied that the president's worldview was not biblical, or at least not sufficiently biblical to ensure wise political direction for the country. It's far too easy, however, to assume that we are the ones with a thoroughly biblical worldview. Santorum's comment gives each of us a golden opportunity to reflect on our own worldviews, particularly as they relate to our wisdom for political life.

How consistently do we see political life through the eyes of Jesus? How much of our political wisdom, to put it in the words of Colossians 2:8, depends on the basic principles of this world rather than on a philosophy based on Christ? More specifically, through what filter do we interpret domestic and international issues and events, prescribe policies, engage with our political opponents, or elect presidents? Blue? Red? Liberal? Conservative? Libertarian? The mainstream media? Talk radio? The blogosphere? The Bible? Far too much of our wisdom, I fear, relies on American attitudes and allegiances that are in conflict with Christ. Here's why.

Jesus had a very strange view of political engagement. Think with me for a moment Jesus had a very strange view of political engagement about the Palestine of his day and how he handled it. Jesus' audiences could at any time have included any cluster of ethnic, social, religious, political, and occupational vested interests and conflicting agendas that were daily in close contact with one another? Jews, Romans, Greeks, religious leaders, government officials, political zealots, apostates, pagans, philosophers, fishermen, soldiers, tax collectors, lawyers, you name it.

That land, it was crazily pluralist, like ours today. What can we learn from our Lord in the midst of all this? For one thing, when people came to him, Jesus did not affirm their vested interests or political ideologies. Neither did he did not tell them that it would take becoming a Sadducee, a Pharisee, a Democrat or a Republican, or even a Jew or a Christian, before they could have their relationships and situations changed.

Instead, to his mixed audiences, whoever you were, Jesus taught: Don't repay anyone violence for violence, settle matters quickly with your adversary, go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, forgive, stop throwing stones, drop the hypocrisy, repent of your sectarian politics and tendencies to violence. And if you hold a career in politics you are not precluded. No wonder Jesus' teaching seemed strange!

What's going on? In short, it was about applying God's peaceable wisdom in pluralist situations. Jesus was a rabbi who taught his listeners to practice God's wisdom-based way of seeing others who were different from them. Jesus called civic officials, religious leaders, and government authorities, not to mention ordinary folk, to a wisdom-based praxis that emphasized not just personally shaking off dehumanizing habits of the heart but also living cooperatively and peaceably with one another amid the plurality.

This is a normative understanding of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. The opposite of shalom is not war but brokenness. It is about the kind of peace that the Hebrew sages and prophets called shalom, the opposite of which is not war but brokenness, whether economic, social, or political. And as Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff once explained to me, 'There is no shalom, even if bullets are not flying, if hearts, minds, and souls, or even dreams, are still broken. We, as God's partners (according to Jewish theology), must help mend and repair the brokenness of the world.'

His use of the word 'repair' was a deliberate reference to the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam*, which means 'repairing the world.' The phrase appears in many contexts in rabbinic literature for influencing both Jewish communities and the world at large toward societies of love, peace, justice, kindness, generosity, and suchlike? seen by some as a kind of rehearsal for the anticipated Messianic age of shalom (or wholeness, human flourishing). That is what Rabbi Jesus was on about throughout his itinerant ministry in Galilee and Judea. Jesus the wisdom teacher signaled to his mixed audiences that they could create samples of that anticipated future in the here and now. It's doable, he said, if you see it through the filter of God's peaceable wisdom and act accordingly.

A philosophy based on Christ giving direction to our politics, it seems to me, takes personally very seriously Jesus' call to shalom. It steadily identifies and exorcises from our worldviews voices, values, and attitudes that conflict with the peaceable way of wisdom that comes from above?from God's love in Christ offered to us for the transforming even of political life in this world amid its plurality. Does this seem strange to us today? I hope so.

Upon hearing it preached and seeing it demonstrated, people ?were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their teachers.? Dumbfounded, they asked, ?Where did this man get this wisdom?? (Matthew 7:29; 13:54). Yes, where?

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