

Chapter Thirteen: Jesus' Socio-Political Ethics in the Gentile World

The Kingdom's Engagement with Political Powers

Our study would not be complete, however, without examining how Luke understands and portrays the Christian community acting within the Gentile world. Once again a systematic literary treatment of Luke-Acts serves us. Luke understands the church to be engaged in a constant political and social polemic against all of Gentile society. Luke deliberately emphasized Jesus' kingship over the entire world, in a political climate where Caesar alone of all mortals was thought to occupy such a privileged role. Luke describes Jesus' ascension in Acts 1 in language normally attributed only to the Roman emperor, since emperors were thought to ascend into the heavens to be divinized after their deaths. For instance, in the parody *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca said that Claudius arrived in the heavens, not as a god, but as a pumpkin. Luke portrays Jesus arriving in the heavens, not as a dead emperor, but as a living one, one whose claim over people extends far beyond the boundaries of any human concoction. More importantly, Luke's ascension is rooted in Hebrew prophetic language, namely, Isaiah's language of the Servant being 'lifted up' (e.g. Isa.52:13) and Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming up to the heavens on a 'cloud' (Dan.7:13). Derived from the Hebrew context but confronting the Greco-Roman, the ascension establishes Jesus' lordship over Israel and the world. In both Hebrew and Roman contexts, Jesus' ascension is a bold and clear lordship claim. The ascension fulfills Gabriel's prophecy in Lk.1:32 – 33, 'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.'

Alliance to Jesus has consistent effects throughout the Empire, repeatedly underscored by Luke. On the issue of ultimate allegiance, Luke was more than clear: the apostles refused to stop talking about Jesus; they constantly disobeyed the request of the civil authorities in Israel to stop proclaiming their message and they will do so again, no matter who the authority is. Peter and John disobey the Jewish Council in Acts 4:1 – 31 and 5:12 – 42. Moreover, if God does not intervene miraculously to deliver them out of prison (like Peter and John in Jerusalem and Paul and Silas in Philippi), they will go willingly to their death (like Stephen and James), but they will not recant.

Moreover, the God of Israel affirms the supremacy of Jesus by eliminating other human claims to divinity. Herod in Acts 12 overreaches himself in the style of traditional monarchs and is struck dead. By itself, this is certainly a warning to Caesar, and the literary symmetry of Acts gives it additional weight. Acts 1 – 12 records the progressive challenge of Christianity in the Hebrew world through the Jewish disciples, culminating with Herod being struck down. The latter section of Acts, chapters 13 – 28, records the progressive challenge of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world through Paul, beginning with Paul's first recorded message in Acts 13 concerning Jesus as the resurrected son of David, the Messianic king of the world, and culminating with the fairly explicit challenge to Caesar not to divinize himself. This is all the more impressive if we take under consideration the theory that Luke-Acts were a single document involved in Paul's trial before Caesar. Caesar himself is one of Luke's intended readers, as Paul confronts politicians and statesmen all the way up the bureaucratic, patronal chain to the *princeps* himself. The Jewish king born under Caesar (Lk.2:1) has now addressed a challenge to the highest Roman office. This biting polemic cannot be missed or minimized.

The political nature of Luke-Acts has already drawn much interest, and a more in-depth treatment would be necessary for establishing my own opinion on more solid ground, but let me offer a preliminary outline. I do not believe that Luke's voluminous writing is, as has been argued by many commentators since Hans Conzelmann, an attempt by Luke to curry the favor of Rome by portraying Romans nobly, Christians as the best possible Roman citizens, and Jews as the contentious culprits of the riots and disturbances throughout the empire. Certainly Luke does not shy away from portraying Romans unfavorably: Luke's Jesus categorically scorns Gentile rulers for being hypocritical about their claim to be 'Benefactors' of the public in Lk.22:25. This statement alone makes Conzelmann's theory questionable, but other examples illustrate Jesus' point: Pilate condemned Jesus unjustly and released Barabbas, a known insurrectionist in Lk.23; the Philippian magistrates flogged Paul and Silas unjustly in Acts 16, Felix hoped that Paul would offer a bribe in Acts 24. These are hardly flattering characterizations of Roman representatives. Furthermore, Luke preserves statements made by Roman citizens concerning the tension between the lordship of Jesus and Roman custom in Acts 16:19 – 21 and 17:7. In this light, the inclusion of Roman soldiers and centurions (Lk.3:14; 7:1 – 10; 23:47; Cornelius in Acts 10, the Philippian jailer in Acts 16; Julius in Acts 27) is probably not Luke's attempt to win the sympathy of the Roman government by portraying Romans favorably; such incidents are probably intended to be confrontational and send quite a different message: They demonstrate that not just Jews, Samaritans, and Greeks, but influential Romans have bent their knees to 'another king, Jesus.'

Christians are not 'the best citizens.' Any attempt to argue that Christians are such leaves open the question, 'Who then is responsible for these social disturbances?' and necessarily answers it with 'the Jews.' After all, if the Romans are 'exemplary' and the Christians are 'good citizens,' then who else is to blame but the Jews? Indeed, this is how Acts has been read on more than a few occasions. But we cannot turn Luke into a spokesperson

for this view. Luke does not use the ‘good citizen’ apologetic which Justin Martyr and Tertullian would later take up and Eusebius promote. Luke–Acts is right away a confrontation with the powers that be and, if anything, is intended to draw the fire away from the synagogue and onto the church.

We can analyze Luke’s use of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:23 – 24 and Acts 13:33 to substantiate this. In both cases, the disciples interpret Psalm 2 to interpret their own experience of ongoing conflict with political powers. In Acts 4, the disciples are under threat from the Sanhedrin and they interpret their situation as an echo or necessary derivative of Jesus’ own experience. They quote Psalm 2:1 – 2 and fill it out with a sequence of words that parallel the Psalm.

Why did the *Gentiles* rage and the *peoples* devise futile things?
The *kings* of the earth took their stand and the *rulers*
Were gathered together against the Lord and His Christ
For truly in this city there
were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed,
both Herod (*king*) and Pontius Pilate (*ruler*),
along with the *Gentiles* and the *peoples* of Israel... (Acts 4:25 – 27)

In other words, they see the situation of Jesus fulfilling the Psalm. But they also see their immediate situation as organically linked to Jesus’ situation; their ministry is a development and continuation of Jesus’ ministry insofar as rejection is concerned. As Jesus was put on trial, so the disciples were put on trial at this point; the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop speaking in Jesus’ name but they refused to heed them (4:18 – 19). Most significantly, the disciples explicitly parallel their experience to that of Jesus in 4:27.¹ The most natural reading of this quotation and its implications is that the disciples believe that they are participating in an ongoing reaction to Jesus that continues onward in their mission.

The gospel message drew this reaction beyond Jerusalem. The same pattern can be found with Paul in Acts 13. In Acts 13:16 – 41, Luke gives us Paul’s first recorded speech, to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in a synagogue. Arguably Luke offers us an outline of what Paul said in order to introduce us to Paul, his speaking ministry, and his characteristic way of engaging Jewish synagogues wherever he went. Paul quotes Psalm 2:7 in Acts 13:33 as an argument for Jesus’ Davidic kingship. However, a week later, the Psalm becomes an ironic descriptor of their negative response. Many within the Jewish community respond with jealousy and try to contradict Paul. Paul declares that he will now go to the Gentiles. But the Jews incited ‘the devout women of prominence’ and ‘the leading men of the city,’ and instigated a persecution against Paul (Acts 13:50). This incident, the fact that it seems to characterize Paul’s ministry from the outset, and its parallel to Jesus’ own synagogue announcement in Lk.4, set the expectation that rejection will always be one response to the spreading of Jesus’ word. Luke probably includes Paul’s quotation of Psalm 2 with the assumption that his readers have already noticed a quotation of that Psalm in Acts 4. Thus, the tension with political figures in Nazareth (by Jesus) and Jerusalem (by Jesus and then the disciples) and Pisidian Antioch (by Paul) is seen as normal, continuous, and descriptive of the way Psalm 2 is coming to pass in and through the Christian mission. Jesus’ kingship is being asserted, but it provokes a reaction from Gentiles, Israelites, and their political leaders. Luke is suggestively saying that Christian proclamation of Jesus’ lordship always produces conflict with political power. This adds weight to my argument that Luke is writing a challenge, not merely a winsome apologetic, to the Gentile powers, including any Romans with and including ‘Theophilus’ that might read Luke’s writings.

Thus, by implication, Luke does not allow for a complete convergence of a nationalistic agenda with Jesus’ lordship. Those are two categorically different bases for socio-political ethics, which is extremely relevant in an inquiry of what constitutes Christian faithfulness in occupational work, since work almost always has social and political ramifications. Christians are not ultimately bound by considerations of social cohesion and continuity. While those are considerations and factors, and while it is helpful to be informed about the impact of our choices, they are not determinative. Instead, we are free to challenge elements or ideologies of work that are bound together with nation or local community, ranging from fascism (national) to the preservation of family or company prestige (local). We are free to challenge the even more far-reaching claims of capitalism and socialism, that these systems are financially beneficial for the ‘global humanity.’ Even when there is sometimes truth to these claims about financial betterment, those ideologies tend to be promoted the loudest by those who benefit from those systems, whereas we must prioritize many other factors. We must keep this in mind as we study the economic panic that sets in when the kingdom message threatens entire industries and Christians are accused of being ‘bad citizens.’

¹ See also Tannehill, *Acts* (1990), p.71.

The Kingdom's Engagement with Gentile Industry: Paul's Ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19 – 20)

As representative of the socio-economic impact of the kingdom, I will consider one particular episode in Acts: the ministry of Paul in Ephesus in Acts 19 – 20. Ephesus is important for our purposes in many ways. Ephesus is the climax of Paul's ministry as a free man, where Paul sees the broadest effectiveness in his lifetime.² Luke spends much time developing what Paul does in Ephesus and how the gospel message impacts the city. As a direct result, Ephesus is the place where the lordship of Christ challenges entire industries and tradespeoples, in this case, the occult magicians and the silversmiths of Artemis. With the exception of tax-collecting, this is the first time a trade or a sector of occupational work is addressed as a clear category. In fact, the comparison is important, because Acts 19 is also a parallel to Luke 19:1 – 10. Jesus' encounter with Zaccheus, the chief tax collector, the head of a whole system of corruption and imperial oppression, occurs right before Jesus enters Jerusalem and is apprehended by the rulers of Jerusalem. Luke is drawing one of his many comparisons between Jesus and Paul. In Acts 19, Paul confronts a whole system of corruption and imperial idolatry, and this event occurs right before Paul returns to Jerusalem and is apprehended and then sent to Rome. Surely, Luke intends this as a parallel. When Christian proclamation reaches its highest and most effective point, it challenges the economic and then political forces of the world. This may cause the death of those who proclaim God's word. But God will vindicate the message of His Son Jesus. And that message will continue to exert pressure upon those who hold economic and political power.

At the time of Paul's ministry in Acts 19, Ephesus was a city conscious of economic decline. Even though Ephesus possessed one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis, and even though Ephesus sat on a major trade route connecting Rome to the East, silt from the river was filling up the bay. The Ephesians knew their days of prosperity were numbered. They were in economic jeopardy, which helps explain why a riot could start so easily. We see resistance to the message of Jesus from both Jewish and Gentile communities. The Jewish community is more measured and less organized in its resistance; their resistance will only get stronger when Paul leaves for Jerusalem and some Jews follow him there and cause a riot. The Gentile community, however, is angrier and more organized in its resistance, because the root cause is their loss of profit. Chapter 19 can be divided into two basic parts: the first, 'Jewish Acceptance and Resistance' in 19:1 – 17, the second, 'Gentile Acceptance and Resistance' in 19:18 – 41. We will focus on the Gentile response.

Two major industries of the Gentile world are affected in Acts 19: the magicians and the silversmiths. These practices were not on the periphery of an otherwise secularized culture. To strike at the occult and the manufacture of idols was to strike at the core of the Gentile world. The magicians who commit themselves to Jesus – apparently a significant number of them – must now look for other work. Their previous livelihood is incompatible with their current profession of faith in Jesus. So they must burn their books of incantations as a gesture of their allegiance to Jesus. Luke records that they burned fifty-thousand silver pieces' worth of books. The silversmiths, on the other hand, do not repent. They seek to hold on to their profession, and 19:25 is particularly illuminating. They say, 'Our prosperity depends on this business.' They start a city-wide riot in Ephesus playing on people's fears of corporate pride, civic insecurity, and economic panic.

The complexities of extracting meaning from these passages to the present are many. What is the relevance of this passage for our inquiry? The significance of this passage should not be limited to blatant issues of the occult or physical idols, which would focus the application of this passage on the non-industrialized world where superstitions and polytheistic religions flourish, or minor undercurrents of the industrialized world (e.g. astrologers, psychics, wiccans, etc.). Both of these hermeneutical moves would technically be accurate, but would leave unchallenged the vast majority of the apparatus of the industrialized sector. Such a bias must make us pause.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim argued, and common sense suggests, that a physical idol is just the focal point of a metaphysic offering humanity a way to control its environment. People turned to idols because they wanted to control the outcomes of harvests, the weather, war, fortune, fertility, etc. An idol is simply an expression of the human desire for control, control that humanity does not want God to have. Defined this way, we may identify many overlapping systems of idols today, most of them rooted in materialism. As this passage illustrates, Gentile society is materialistic and worships money. Ephesians and Colossians support this assertion in simple terms: 'Covetousness is idolatry' (Eph.5:5; Col.3:5). Hence we need not enter into the debates surrounding various sociological analyses, like Jacques Ellul's assessment that technology is an extension of magic – in that technological precision is similar in

² See Tannehill, Acts (1990): Luke makes this clear to us by paralleling Paul to earlier Christian leaders, including Jesus and Peter. (1) In Ephesus, Paul was God's channel of bestowing the Holy Spirit, as were Peter and Jesus before him. (2) Paul cast out demons, as did Peter and Jesus before him. (3) Paul's clothes were vehicles of God's healing, as happened to both Peter and Jesus. Furthermore, and more importantly, (4) God reaches more people through Paul here than anywhere else. In 19:10 and 19:17, Luke says. 'All the inhabitants of Asia [Minor] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.' This is an ongoing situation for just over two years even when Paul was kicked out of the synagogue.

form and function to the precise incantations of sorcerers³ – even though I believe these analyses have some validity and are underappreciated. We can simply stay within the radical critique of materialism offered by Jesus, as well as his prescriptive uses of money, since the degree to which materialism is endorsed increases the likelihood that some serious inequity or injustice is being perpetrated. Any behavior and *any institution* that does not conform to Jesus' ethics of wealth should be viewed with suspicion and intelligently critiqued. Once the underlying assumption is gone that the engine of economic growth must be theologically protected, a Christian critique can enter in with compelling truth and power.

A Christian critique of injustice should address – and in some cases has already addressed – the following: the lucrative sex trade in Southeast Asia; the profusion of adult programming on all telecommunications media; the reinvigoration of child pornography across the globe solely due to the internet; the drug cartels fueling the economies of South American nations like Colombia; the military-industrial complex driving much of the U.S. economy; and various types of corporate behavior. We will expand greatly on corporate behavior in chapter four, but for now, it is sufficient to point out all the major problems people in the U.S. have experienced as a result of the corporation, a legal entity that allows wealth to be deployed in the interest of those who possess that wealth: child labor and exploitation; the indenture and exploitation of slaves; labor disputes about pay and overwork; lack of safe work environments and working conditions; collusion; monopoly and price gouging; lack of equal opportunities for women and minorities; overt outward-facing racism such as bank red-lining and predatory lending; advertising and marketing practices playing on ethnic struggles; harmful or wasteful products being marketed to the public (tobacco, lead paint, remote control TV's designed for toddlers, etc.); the impact of environmental degradation on other human life; inattention to the negative impact of massive layoffs and relocation of work on communities often causing massive urban poverty (e.g. Ford closing its Michigan plant); corruption and intentional financial mismanagement designed to pool money for the wealthy (e.g. the Enron debacle); and corporate influence on political processes. In this last category, I have in mind especially tax exemptions for wealthy corporations, companies lobbying government for special protections, and U.S. oil interests influencing U.S. foreign and military policy in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. All of those issues manifest a myopic use of power by the wealthy, for the wealthy.

Thus, to anticipate what I will argue later, I believe that the primary area of engagement Christians ought to take up is *the socio-political environment* that allows for wealth to be managed by a select few at the expense of the broader community. This is why, in chapter four, we will critique corporations, banks, and political structures using Jesus' ethics of inclusion, generosity, and reconciliation. The very idea that prices should be driven by the free market rides on the mistake that human beings assign proper cost to damaging the environment, and look out for the long-term sustainability of our lifestyles, which we most certainly do not. It is important to note here that I believe a Christian critique of occupational work in the industrialized world should focus not on specific downstream products or certain 'technologies.' For example, Amish communities do not use electricity or gasoline. Other Christians take issue with 'science.' While this type of disengagement may be acceptable for small segments of the Christian community, it is far too specific to be relevant to the whole body.

Furthermore, a Christian critique of injustice should, as John the Baptist and Jesus did with tax collectors, *personalize* any injustices committed. While it is true that Christians must be sensitive to structural and institutional issues like law, Christians ought to call pimps, gangsters, drug dealers, corporate executives, managers, board members, stockholders, policymakers, and judges to take personal responsibility for the harm done to others, especially because we have seen that Jesus' stern teaching against materialism can be invoked *on any front*. We should not merely place the blame on systemic factors while actual people bear no responsibility for changing both ourselves and the system. In fact, I am concerned that the system maintains itself precisely because, on the one hand, people shield their public lives from Jesus' ethics and do not deal with their own materialism as it manifests itself in the professional, public realm; but on the other hand, if they acknowledge their complicity with the system, they often quit their jobs for others that provoke less inner tension, leaving someone else to fill that post. Both tendencies appear especially true for high-level politicians and executives. John the Baptist and Jesus, by contrast, apparently left quite a few tax collectors in their jobs, only with a radically different understanding of money and community. This means that some actual systemic change happened because personal change happened quickly. Too, this personalization of injustice is appropriate because the acceptance of Jesus' ethics is a *precondition* of genuine conversion to Christ. Christian proclamation does not need to – and must not – wait for people to 'receive Jesus' and then 'move on' to Jesus' ethics as part of 'discipleship.' Ethics and evangelism go hand in hand; both are necessary for conversion. If all these things are true, then our theological engagement with the marketplace and the political realm must be done publicly and actively, in tandem with evangelism, for the simple reason that we are calling all people to live fully within Jesus' kingdom.

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*.

All this lends considerable weight, as I have argued in these two chapters and will continue to argue in the next, to my belief that a Christian critique of injustice finds its firmest theological footing on Jesus' massive critique of materialism and the general New Testament view that materialism is an idolatry demanding repentance, as well as Jesus' vision for his kingdom community and his inclusive ethic towards outsiders and the poor.⁴ I have shown – and will continue to show – that 'creation theology' and texts like Genesis 1 – 11, long taken by Western Christians as justifications for the socio-political status quo among Gentile Christians, actually serve as polemical texts describing an ideal critiquing the entire Gentile world. We have seen in chapter one how a Christian engagement with injustice cannot be firmly founded on how the Mosaic system treated 'widows, orphans, and aliens,' since it is not clear that one can do this without recalling the entire patrilineal land system and exclusivist institutions as well. Nor can a theological foundation be found by turning some vision of the future consummated kingdom into a blueprint for the present, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Oscar Romero wondered whether this was possible, and whether the end justifies the means, and I wonder whether kingdom advancement goes awry when Jesus' ethics are downplayed, resulting in negligence or violence.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. At this point, we can say with confidence that civic (and thus, national) security is not an adequate reason to stop an aggressive Christian public critique of questionable practices and institutions. Luke might have even conceded to Demetrius his point: perhaps the financial prosperity of Ephesus did indeed depend on the elevation of the Artemis cult and the proliferation of her idols, at least in the short term. But if Luke believed such a thing – and I suspect he is acknowledging it – he offers no apology or sympathy. Even in conditions of economic decline, Christian critique of materialism-as-idolatry should be vigorous, especially when people are marginalized by other people or institutions. Significantly, neither Paul nor Luke suggests that some kind of clever reconciliation is possible for the sake of keeping people employed or wealthy. For instance, no thought is given to the possibility that the silversmiths should now make silver idols of Jesus instead of Artemis.

⁴ The evolution of the Catholic social magisterium reflects this. The first such encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, focused on Western Europe and drew mainly on concepts drawn from natural law. Those of the Second Vatican Council, including those of Pope John Paul II, have been more christocentric in its foundation and global in its scope. I suspect, however, that 'human rights,' a lingering aspect of natural law, will lead Christians down a different ethical trajectory. The idea of 'human rights' logically separates the lordship of Christ from how human beings treat one another in an effort to find common ethical ground between the church and the world. However, it should be abundantly clear that Jesus' teaching about wealth and generosity towards others goes far beyond what 'natural law' would require. A truly christocentric ethical foundation grounds the treatment of the other within the lordship of Christ.