

Samuel Rutherford and the Confessionally Christian State

David Field – September 2007 - Draft

Evangelical defeatism and public theology

“Even a loser can win when he's up against a defeatist.”¹

Islam is definitely a loser and humanism is definitely a loser. But, sadly, when it comes to matters of public theology, most evangelicals are defeatists. And “even a loser can win when he's up against a defeatist.”

It is remarkable, really, that evangelicals should be defeatists, a dreadful failure of perspective which comes from a refusal to look up. Our discussions are sometimes like a debate between the two men in Slough which has been going on for the last 120 years. One of them insists that humans cannot fly, that if God had intended us to fly he would have given us wings – we know the arguments. The other has produced detailed documents showing how, if pedal speed can be maintained to power the mechanical wings, then it is scientifically possible for humans to fly almost a mile. Meantime, a huge passenger jet containing between 300 and 600 people passes overhead every two minutes.

Evangelical defeatism is a failure of Biblical perspective. After all, the risen Lord Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth and has been made head over all things for the Church; he is the ruler of the kings of the earth and he is currently putting his enemies beneath his feet; he has presumably asked the Father for the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession - and so he will receive them. All nations will bow to Jesus and all kings will serve him and his kingdom will grow to become the largest plant in the garden with the nation-birds finding rest in its branches. His kingdom is the stone which crushed the kingdoms of men in Daniel 2 and which is growing to become a mountain-empire which fills the whole earth. He is the firstborn from among the dead and therefore it is right that in all things he has the first place. He

¹ Mark Steyn, “Facing Down Iran,” n.p. [cited 8 September 2007]. Online: http://www.city-journal.org/html/16_2_iran.html

has been highly exalted and not only *will* every knee bow to him but every knee *should* bow to him.

Evangelical defeatism is a failure of historical perspective. After all, the statistics are out there. It took 1400 years for 1% of the world's population to become Christians and then another 360 years for that to double to 2%. Another 170 years saw that grow from 2% to 4% and then, between 1960 and 1990 the proportion of the world's population made up of Bible-believing Christians rose from 4% to 8%. Now, in 2007, one third of the world's population confesses that Jesus is Lord and 11% of the world's population are "evangelical" Christians. The evangelical church is growing twice as fast as Islam and three times as fast as the world's population. South America is turning Protestant faster than Continental Europe did in the sixteenth century. South Koreans reckon that they can evangelize the whole of North Korea within five years once that country opens up. And then there's the Chinese church consisting of tens of millions of Christians who have learned to pray, who have confidence in Scripture, who know about spiritual warfare, have been schooled in suffering and are qualified to rule. One day in the next century that Church - tens of millions of Christians trained to die - will be released into global mission and our prayers for the fall of Islam will be answered.

Evangelical defeatism in matters of public theology is a failure of biblical and historical perspective. Lacking that perspective, British evangelical defeatists are riddled with white guilt and Christian guilt and are marked by parochial and pessimistic self-loathing and suspicion. They offer their hands to the humanists' handcuffs and their children to their indoctrination centres, making loud assurances that the last thing they would want to do would be to 'impose their morality' on others. In public policy debates they speak in the name of the 'whole person' and 'faith perspectives' rather than in the name of King Jesus. In their Bible studies they have hermeneutical fits if someone suggests that the Old Testament might be relevant for our discussions of public theology, insisting rather that Christians are the wilderness community who live under the cross, are marked by suffering and are destined for political and cultural impotence. Evangelical defeatists begin to twitch if someone mentions too loudly in public that the Bible is God's infallible and sufficient Word, that Blair and Brown and Cameron and the rest of

them are idolatrous high priests of the greatest false god of modern times, the State, who will one day be on their knees before King Jesus, and that the task the Lord Jesus Christ has given the church is to subdue the earth and fill it, that is to disciple the nations.

Samuel Rutherford and his fellow-believers in the Covenanting tradition of the seventeenth century must look down from heaven in disbelief. Their gospel confidence and robust theocratic and Christendomite vision produced an understanding of ‘public theology’ which honoured the kingship of Jesus and, under scrutiny, proves a good deal more consistent and durable than alternative proposals adopted by many Christians today. Rutherford’s writing implies what might be called a “confessionally Christian state” and this paper aims to describe and evaluate this in comparison with the three available options for the constitutional arrangement of a nation-state.

Samuel Rutherford’s *Lex, rex*²

First published in 1644, Samuel Rutherford’s *Lex, rex*³ is one of the fifty most important works of public theology yet to have been written.⁴ Charles II hated it and had it burned at the Restoration but it was acclaimed by its intended audience in the 1640s: John Coffey tells us that

According to the Scottish moderate, Henry Guthry, every member of the 1645 General Assembly ‘had in his hand that Book lately published by Mr Samuel Rutherford ... [which was] so idolised that whereas Buchanan’s treatise *De Jure Regni apud Scotos*, was looked upon as an oracle, this coming forth, it was slighted (as not anti-monarchical enough) and Rutherford’s *Lex, rex* only thought authentic’.⁵

² Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, rex* (London, 1644). The original 1644 edition is held by the British Library, the Bodleian, and by the University libraries of Cambridge, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Nottingham, and the LSE. An 1843 edition has been reprinted a number of times over the last thirty years and *Lex, rex* is also to be found online at <http://www.constitution.org/sr/lexrex.htm> and in a fully searchable digital edition with modern orthography at <http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/rutherford/index.html>.

³ For a thorough exposition of Rutherford’s *Lex, rex* with extensive bibliographical leads see my “Put not your trust in princes: Samuel Rutherford, the four causes, and the limitation of civil government,” in *Tales of Two Cities* (ed. Stephen Clark; Leicester: IVP, 2005), 83-151.

⁴ I have put online “The Reduced *Lex, rex*,” a 44 page pdf document listing available editions of Rutherford’s book, giving the full title page and the detailed table of contents and providing selected illustrative quotations which give a flavour and a sense of the whole work. It can be seen at <http://www.davidpfield.com/other/Reduced-Lex-rex.pdf>

⁵ John Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 151.

Coffey goes on to describe the book as “an unusually comprehensive statement of Calvinistic political thought” and this being the case, as conservative evangelical and Reformed Christians in this country recover a biblical interest in public theology, study of Rutherford’s work may well prove to be a worthwhile exercise, not least because the assumptions, substance, and implications of his arguments in defence of armed resistance against the tyrant amount to a forceful case for what we might call, “the confessionally Christian state” or, in honour of Rutherford, the “covenanted nation”.⁶

Five years later, Rutherford published another work of public theology, *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*. This is not the sort of title which commends itself to many people these days and these two works of Rutherford together seem to confirm what many modern evangelicals suspect, namely, that belief in a confessional state produces, or at the least tends to, a fundamental intolerance.

Actually, the opposite is true as there are only three possibilities. The first is a false confession which is idolatrous because it makes a false god to be the ultimate authority. The second is no confession which is tyrannical because it means that the actions of the state are ungrounded. The third is a Christian confession which is this is the foundation of justice and true tolerance, better called liberty. Some Christians, so-called “principled pluralists,” try to find a fourth position but as we shall see later, this position is unstable and resolves, under pressure, into one of the other three positions.

In the mid-1630s, Charles I and Archbishop Laud sought to impose religious uniformity upon the Scottish Church and when this was resisted, they raised an army to march against the Scots. In 1642, refusing to give in to any more of the English Parliament’s demands for constitutional and ecclesiastical reform, Charles raised the Royal Standard in Nottingham and the English Civil War began. In 1643, the Scots made an alliance

⁶ Supporting the claim that England is such a covenanted nation, see *The Form and Order of Service ... observed in The Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II ... 1953* [cited 8 September 2007] Online: <http://www.oremus.org/liturgy/coronation/index.html>

with the English Parliament, providing military support in exchange for further commitments to reform of the English Church.

Lex, rex is a defence of the Scots' military action against Charles, both in the so-called Bishops' Wars of 1639-40 and, from 1643 onwards, in support of the Parliamentary side in the English Civil War.

The first sentence of *Lex, rex*, outlines the subject matter of the book, Rutherford simply stating:

I reduce all that I am to speak of the power of kings, to the author or efficient, - the matter or subject, - the form or power, - the end and fruit of their government, - and to some cases of resistance.⁷

Rutherford is working with the four *aitia* of Aristotle, often referred to as the four causes: the efficient cause, the material cause, the formal cause and the final cause. In his "cases of resistance" he discusses the grounds, occasions, and manner of restraining, restricting or withdrawing the king's power and this discussion flows from what he has said about the four causes.

If we reorder the causes (to final, efficient, formal and material) and take "cases of resistance" to be "forms of limitation" we may rephrase the conclusions of *Lex, rex* as a series of questions: What is the purpose or goal of government? Who or what brings government into being? What is it that makes government government, or what is the essence of government? What is government made out of? What are the due limitations of civil government?

By way of further clarification, it should be noted that Rutherford's work was written in reply to an earlier work by John Maxwell, the former bishop of Ross and in the 1640s a chaplain to Charles I. Maxwell had written a book entitled, *The Sacred and Royal Prerogative of Christian Kings* whereas Rutherford's title continues, *The Law and the Prince. A Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People*. To caricature in order to

⁷ Rutherford, *Lex, rex*, 1.

clarify, Maxwell argues, “God has appointed kings, the word of the king is law and no resistance against kings can be justified”. Rutherford responds, “God has appointed kings as agents and servants of his law for the good of the people and thus, when they act contrary to God’s law and the good of the people, they may be resisted.” Is the king over the law or is the law over the king?

The main lines of Rutherford’s argument may be briefly stated.

The final cause of government – what is its purpose?

The purpose of civil government is to secure the well-being of the people by protecting them and the church so that they may attain their highest good in the knowledge of God in Christ. This is *why* government exists.

The efficient cause of government – who or what brings it into being?

The God who rules all things through his exalted Son brings government into being using the consent of the people as a means. God is the primary cause and the people are the secondary cause; God is the principal and the people are the agent. This is *how* government comes to be.

The formal cause of government – what is the essence of government?

What makes government government is its submission to and embodiment of the law of God discovered through study and application of his infallible and sufficient Word, the Bible. Embodiment of the law of God – this is what government *is*.

The material cause of government – what is the stuff out of which government is made?

Government is made of ordinary sinful human beings, equal with all others by nature and each one of whom is directly accountable in conscience and on judgment day to the one true living God. This is what government is *made out of*.

Rutherford’s defence of armed resistance against the tyrant follows from each of these points. Combining the first two points we may say that if government works against its purpose then those whom God used to put it in power may resist its abuse of power or

put it out of power. Combining the third and fourth points we may say that if government ceases to be government then those in places of government have removed their own crowns and are nothing more than sinful humans and the people are obliged neither to fall in with the sins of such false rulers nor to attribute any more legitimacy to their attacks than they would to the attacks of any other sinners.

Lex, rex and the confessionally Christian state

Although Rutherford's questions were not the same as ours, nevertheless, when we do bring some of *our* questions to *Lex, rex* we find that in this astonishing work of 'public theology' Rutherford has constructed for us a platform for the confessional state, the Christian nation, the establishment of Christianity, the covenanted nation, or Christendom.

Illustratively, those who want a confessional state, a Christian nation, the establishment of Christianity, and who seek the coming of Christendom could be identified as those who assert:

The first line of the constitution of each and every nation on earth should include a statement such as "The triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the one true living God and he is the maker, ruler, redeemer, and judge of the world. The Bible is his infallible and altogether authoritative Word. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is King of Kings and Lord of lords and has all authority in heaven and on earth."⁸

⁸ Although flawed in various ways, it may be of interest to include here four articles from *The Instrument of Government*, (1654), [cited 8 September 2007]. Online: http://www.olivercromwell.org/protectorate/protectorate_6.htm. This could be regarded as England's first written constitution.

XVII. That the persons who shall be elected to serve in Parliament, shall be such (and no other than such) as are persons of known integrity, fearing God, and of good conversation, and being of the age of twenty-one years.

XXXV. That the Christian religion, as contained in the Scriptures, be held forth and recommended as the public profession of these nations; and that, as soon as may be, a provision, less subject to scruple and contention, and more certain than the present, be made for the encouragement and maintenance of able and painful teachers, for the instructing the people, and for discovery and confutation of error, hereby, and whatever is contrary to sound doctrine; and until such provision be made, the present maintenance shall not be taken away or impeached.

XXXVI. That to the public profession held forth none shall be compelled by penalties or otherwise; but that endeavours be used to win them by sound doctrine and the example of a good conversation.

XXXVII. That such as profess faith in God by Jesus Christ (though differing in judgment from the doctrine, worship or discipline publicly held forth) shall not be restrained from, but shall be protected in,

Rutherford would have regarded such a thing as perfectly obvious and a few moments reflecting on his arguments in *Lex, rex* shows as much. Each of his four main points requires acknowledgement of the one true living triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the *will of God* through the consent of the people which brings about government's existence; the *law of God* which defines government's essence; the *creatures of God* which form government's raw materials; and the *purpose of God* which provides government's *raison d'être*. Without an acknowledgement of God, all of Rutherford's claims about government are evacuated of content. Take away the confession of the true God and there is nothing left. The presupposition and content and implication of *Lex, rex* is that the public and political confession of the one true living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the only sufficient, coherent, and durable foundation for the state and the submissive and explicit acknowledgement of God is necessary to the faithful and effective conduct of government.

In summary, then, Samuel Rutherford's arguments in *Lex, rex* are intended to provide a defence of taking up arms against the tyrant and they are founded upon an exposition of the purpose, origin, nature, and raw-materials of civil government. That same exposition also shows how Rutherford would straightforwardly be a supporter of what might be called the covenanted Christian nation or the confessional state.

Three questions may be asked about the relationship between the Lordship of Jesus and the kings of the earth:

- 1) Is Jesus Christ the ruler of the kings of the earth?
- 2) Is it desirable that the kings of the earth should acknowledge this?
- 3) Is it desirable that the kings of the earth *qua* kings should publicly confess this?

Non-Christians and Christians are, of course, distinguished by their answers to the first two questions but those who support and those who oppose the Christian confessional state are distinguished by their answer to the third. Rutherford and the covenanting

the profession of the faith and exercise of their religion; so as they abuse not this liberty to the civil injury of others and to the actual disturbance of the public peace on their parts: provided this liberty be not extended to Popery or Prelacy, nor to such as, under the profession of Christ, hold forth and practise licentiousness.

tradition answer the third question with no less a ringing and confident “yes” than they give to the first two.

Given the purpose, origin, nature, and stuff of the human person, it is clear and important that each human being confess the triune God, recognize Jesus as Lord, and live with the Word of God as his or her supreme authority. To Rutherford and the covenanting tradition, it is no less clear and important, given the purpose, origin, nature, and stuff of human government that each human ruler also confess the triune God, recognize Jesus as Lord, and live with the Word of God as his or her supreme authority.

Objections to the confessionally Christian state

For all this, however, there are few things better able raise evangelical hackles than the idea of the confessional state. A number of important objections are frequently expressed and brought and my intention in this section is to state some of the more common objections and channel a Rutherfordian response.

A constitution may be thought of as “the fundamental organic law or principles of government of a nation, state, society, or other organisation, embodied in written documents, or implied in the institutions and customs of the country or society,”⁹ and it will be recalled that, illustratively, those who support the confessional state believe it to be a biblically required and important goal that the first line of the constitution of each and every nation on earth should include a statement such as “The triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the one true living God and he is the maker, ruler, redeemer, and judge of the world. The Bible is his infallible and altogether authoritative Word. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is King of Kings and Lord of lords and has all authority in heaven and on earth.”

Objection 1: This is a departure from New Testament priorities and from the New Testament agenda for the church.

⁹ *Pears Cyclopaedia*, (112th ed.; London: Penguin, 2004), ed. Christopher Cook, L.26.

This objection falsely assumes that to regard something which is not explicitly described as a Christian objective in the New Testament as desirable is to depart from the New Testament priorities and agenda. But it is possible to believe that it would be a good and proper thing for the nations of the world to have explicitly Christian constitutions without thereby implying that the achievement of that end demands a particular type or degree of activity from particular people or institutions.

Christian constitutionalists make no claim that the institutional church should divert resources or give a certain amount of attention to the establishment of a Christian constitution. The validity of the objection depends entirely upon what priority and attention is given to the matter. If proponents of the confessional state suggested that achieving constitutional change should be our top priority and that we should divert all our Christian energy to it, then this would be a fair objection. If, on the other hand, the suggestion was simply that this is how the world would look if all was as it should be then it is being used as a critical standpoint and as a legitimate prayer-goal. In that case, it would be like saying, “we seek a world in which there are no abortions and in which no-one dies by starvation”. Most Christians would agree that that is a state of affairs which is biblically required (it is an expression of the revealed will of God) and yet such agreement says nothing about how much energy and attention should be given to bringing it about.

And just as Oliver O’ Donovan speaks of Christendom as a *response* to mission rather than an alternative to it or a distraction from it,¹⁰ so, it must be asked, what if the civil magistrate is converted? Imagine that the church is faithful in mission and that, through the blessing of God upon that faithfulness, one day parliament comes to the church with this appeal: “We know that Jesus Christ is king of kings and that we must give account to him for all our actions. We know that in our capacity as rulers we are to acknowledge the supreme authority of Jesus. We know that the Bible is sufficient to equip us for every good work. And we have been asked by the people of this country to provide a written constitution. Please, O Church, while we are not for a moment relinquishing to you our God-given responsibility to rule, we would like you to help us understand what

¹⁰ Oliver O’ Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 195.

the Bible teaches on this matter.” That the proponent of the confessional state at that point has an answer to give to parliament says nothing whatever about whether or not he has departed from the priorities and agenda of New Testament. Indeed, failure to have an answer is a sign of unfaithfulness.

This in turn relates to the need to understand our times. Ministers of the Word of God would have less to say about national constitutions in Athens and Corinth in the middle of the first century than they would in Edinburgh or London in the middle of the seventeenth century or than they will in Chile and China in the middle of the twenty-second century. Purely in terms of covenantal context, Samuel Rutherford’s address to the powers in the middle of the seventeenth century may be more like the setting of an Old Testament prophet than that of New Testament evangelist because, after all, Rutherford was facing a nation characterized by almost universal profession of faith in the true God and by the failure to live consistently with that profession of faith.

All of this is simply to say that believing that it would be a good and proper thing for the nations of the world to have explicitly Christian constitutions says nothing at all about the priority which a person assigns to it. Most Christians would regard a litter-free and a slavery-free world as desirable but unless they go on to demand certain types or levels of activity from particular people we would not accuse them of departing from priorities and the agenda of the New Testament. I personally believe that the world would be more closely conformed to the revealed will of God if all churches used alcoholic wine for the Lord’s Supper and if we returned to the gold standard but that says nothing about whether or not I am faithful to the priorities and agenda of the New Testament.

Objection 2: This amounts to the worship of “power”.

It is indeed possible that proponents of the confessional state may be lured by the attraction of the “power” of writing constitutions. They may fall into the temptation of thinking that if only they had their hands on political power then all would be well. But this objection resolves down into two forms.

The first form, which some anabaptists might be attracted to, amounts to saying that all political power is corrupt and corrupting and is – as such – to be avoided and resisted. The problem with this is both that it fails to recognize the strong biblical possibility that the righteous may be given positions of rule and, much more importantly, that it cedes the concept of “power” to the unrighteous. If the life, teaching, and death of Jesus have shown us that leadership is a form of service, and that power may be exercised in humility in order to bless others then to resist or run from holding power as intrinsically and unavoidably corrupt and corrupting is to deny Christ. If all exercise of authority is proud and violent then why do we love Jesus so much since he has – and exercises – all authority in heaven and on earth? The stance of radically egalitarian, pacifist, non-resistance proves too much: eschewing all exercise of “power” leaves no room for activities with explicit biblical mandate such as the expulsion of false teachers, the discipline of children, the punishment of criminals, and the judgment of Satan.

The second form of this objection to the confessional state (that it amounts to the worship of power) is simply an (entirely appropriate) alert to the dangers of power and to the temptation to thinking that writing constitution could take the place of or bring about the changing of human persons. But this danger is common to all those who believe that political power is not intrinsically evil and constitutes as much an argument against opponents of the confessional state as against proponents of it. In that sense, it is strictly irrelevant.

Objection 3: This will lead to the adoption of unbiblical methods of societal change

This objection is similarly strictly irrelevant. Yes, it is possible that proponents of the confessional state might place too much hope in the attainment of that goal or might seek to achieve it by unbiblical means but there is nothing about holding the goal that makes this necessarily true nor anything about not holding this goal that makes a person less susceptible to adopting unbiblical methods of societal change. Evangelical proponents of the confessional state rightly stress the non-violent, multi-generational, servant-minded, prayerful and loving preaching and living of the Gospel in the power of the Spirit as the means of societal change. Pure worship, living as the alternative society, serving and praying and witnessing and witnessing and praying and serving are

the ways that the gospel advances. By definition, no *evangelical* supporter of the idea of the confessional state could believe that this required retreating from the priorities of gospel preaching and godly living just as he would assert that there is no reason why affirming and living those priorities required the abandonment of the desire that Christ be given first place in all things, including the constitutions of nations.

Objection 4: The confessionally Christian state has no room for democracy or tolerance: it imposes belief on people.

All law is imposed morality and the real questions, therefore, are whether the morality is God-given and whether the laws are just. But it is worth noting how Rutherford's explanation of the efficient cause of government precisely answers the charge that the confessional state is anti-democratic. He insists that while God is the principal efficient cause of government, the consent of the people is necessary for the legitimacy of government (though he believes that there are other ways of giving that consent than through democratic ballot). That being the case, for a government to impose a confession on the state without the consent of the people itself delegitimizes the government. The basis upon which a Christian confession for the state rests itself rules out the imposition of such a confession without the consent of the people.

We have no difficulty in understanding this in relation to individuals and the gospel. While it is true that all people *should* personally acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus and while it is desirable that they do so, some methods of bringing about such a state of affairs are forbidden by the gospel itself. Similarly, while it is true that all nations *should* constitutionally acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus and while it is desirable that they do so, some methods of bringing about such a state of affairs are forbidden by the gospel itself. What is so difficult about that?

Objection 5: The confessional state has a bad track record

At this point most Christians¹¹ have Constantine and the Crusades, Calvin's Geneva and Cromwell's Protectorate in mind. There are significant defenses that can be mounted

¹¹ Most British evangelical defeatist Christians, that is! See Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, (Oxford: OUP, 2006) for evidence that the African church is a lot less troubled by the political conquest and claims of Jesus.

against the charges usually brought but there is no need to mount such defenses: a bad track record is not itself a compelling argument. For the first few days of trying to walk a year old boy may have a bad track record consisting of hurting himself, repeatedly failing, and damaging things around him. And yet most parents do not, after a few days, conclude, “he’s obviously not meant to be a walker – don’t let him do it, he’ll only hurt himself and others.” So what if the infant church – in these early days of the first couple of millennia since the resurrection – has notched up a few embarrassing and premature and painful failures? Non-confessional states are hardly marked by justice and liberty for all, by non-aggression, administrative competence, non-intrusiveness and harm-free righteousness. How’s the track record of non-Christian confessional states such as Muslim states and Marxist states? How’s the track record of liberal democracies keen to spread liberal democracy into the middle-east in order to bring about regional security and engage in nation-building? The self-loathing of evangelical Christians in the West which has allowed the humanists to intimidate us with a few mentions of past failures is ridiculous: “Oh, I love Jesus, I believe the Bible is true, so please, please don’t put political power in my hands because I might misuse it. Don’t let me near government. Please give political power to the Jesus-haters and the Bible-despisers. Give it to the Muslims and the atheists and the humanists, they’ll be so much better at ruling wisely and righteously than we could be.”

Objection 6: This goal is associated with a coercive and arrogant and intolerant demeanour.

The desire for a confessional Christian state is associated with a triumphalist, arrogant and intolerant demeanour. Another strictly irrelevant argument. After all, conservative evangelicalism is *associated* with a narrow, bigoted and proud demeanour. Sadly, the association is, on occasion, rightly made but as conservative evangelicals are rightly quick to answer, this is in spite of, and not a necessary consequence of, being a conservative evangelical.

Objection 7: We cannot confidently hold this as a goal until we have solved hermeneutical problems about the Christian use of the Old Testament.

Why not? Are not some things already perfectly clear? It is clear that the Old Testament is God-breathed, useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness; that the Old Testament points to Christ and equips us for every good work; that the Old Testament contains wise, just and beautiful laws which expressed God's character and purposes for one particular social order once upon a time. There is nothing about the desire for a written constitution acknowledging Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the one true living God, recognising the Bible as God's perfect word and the Lord Jesus Christ as the one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given which requires all of our hermeneutical problems to be solved before we acknowledge the legitimacy of that desire. In any case, the way that the Lord brings his Church to maturity is not by first getting everything clear in their minds and then telling them to proceed to action. Rather, it is as his people are faithful and attempt obedience with some knowledge that the Lord reveals more to them. God has not ordered the world so that persons first arrive at adult understanding and then begin to live; rather persons begin to live on the basis of true, though childlike understanding, and then grow in understanding *as* they live in obedience.

Objection 8: Proponents of a confessionally Christian state fail fully to take into account our fallibility and ignorance. Other voices must be heard

To repeat an earlier answer, we do know some things rather clearly: the triune God is maker, ruler and judge of all things; Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth; the Bible is the infallible and sufficient word of God; and civil government is God's servant, an avenger of his wrath on the evil-doer. In relation to those big and clear things, there is no command from God to listen to other voices. Adam and Eve, ignorant and fallible as they were, were not obliged thereby to give the serpent a hearing were they? And the people of God addressed in Deuteronomy 13, even though they were fallible and ignorant, were forbidden by God himself to give a hearing to the idolater.

If there were never closure, judgment, or decision until all voices were one then there would be no laws or punishments at all because we have no reason to believe that Satan

is likely to give up his dissent. If we pass judgments or make decisions while there are still dissenting voices then we have rightly concluded that there are some things which our ignorance and fallibility does not prevent us acting on. If we wait to act until we are omniscient and infallible then we will never act but if we live by the Word of the omniscient and infallible God then we find ourselves animated rather than paralyzed.

Objection 9: The desire for a confessionally Christian state represents an over-realized eschatology.

As mentioned above, it is possible (indeed, necessary) to state what is desirable in the light of God's revealed will without predicting that this will be actualized before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the case of the individual, entire Christlikeness is desirable. Does the fact that this will not be attained before resurrection morning mean that in thinking about it, praying for it, and wishing to move towards it, I am guilty of over-realized eschatology? Not at all. In fact, if I had no idea what Christlikeness looked like then I would have neither a measure of my current faithfulness or unfaithfulness and nor would I have a goal to aspire to. A proper description of the standard becomes the (within-history) unattainable but nevertheless desired and striven for goal and the measure of current faithfulness.

And so it is that we want kings to bow down to Christ and nations to serve him; we want the nations streaming to Zion to learn the law of the Lord; we hope that the kings will be wise and the rulers be instructed and that they will serve the Lord with fear and honour the Son; we look forward to the growing empire of the Lord welcoming the bird-nations into its branches; to seeing the nations themselves subdued and disciplined by the gospel. None of us know how far these things will be actualized before the return of Christ. All of us know that they will not be fully actualized before then. But far from the mere desire for these things amounting to over-realized eschatology, in fact, the absence of a desire for these things means that we have neither a critical standpoint against which to measure the present nor a righteous aspiration as we move into the future.

Objection 10: This is an unbiblical confusion of authorities – it leads to ecclesiocracy.
The Bible teaches what might be called “institutional pluralism and ethical monism”. That is, there are multiple governments but only one ultimate Lord. Church government is accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ; civil government is accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ; family government is accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not, however, mean that the church rules the state nor that the state rules the church. A confessional Christian state is merely telling the truth about civil government, namely, that it is established by God, and accountable to him and that it is to be ruled by his Word. The goal of a Christian constitution, far from being a confusion of authorities, is a recognition of the over-arching authority over all earthly authorities – that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Objection 11: It's too late: we live in a post-Christian world

This objection requires knowledge of the date of Christ's return which Jesus has told us we do not have. How long will it be before we see our blessed hope, the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ? What if the Lord were to show his steadfast love to thousands of generations? What if, here in 2007, we are still in the early church? What if, far from taking a ‘long’ time (4000 years) after the fall to send the Redeemer, when we reach judgment day we will look back and say, “almost as soon as Adam fell (in just 4000 years) God sent his Son”?

Global perspective as well as temporal perspective is needed. Christians in Africa, South America, and south-east Asia would be surprised to hear talk of a “post-Christian world” or of it being too late for the establishment of confessionally Christian nations. We do not live in a post-Christian world; we live in an anti-Christian phase in the West.

Objection 12: The establishment of Christian national constitutions is too difficult and, in any case, perfectionist.

To repeat what was said above, entire personal Christlikeness before seeing Jesus face to face is also “too difficult” but this does not mean that it is not to be our legitimate direction of travel. Walking is “too difficult” for three month old children and yet just a year later most of them are doing it. Christ is King, his Spirit is omnipotent, grace is

stronger than sin and perhaps the people of God need more of the grace of patience-confidence which stops measuring things by the rule of single locations and single lifetimes and looks up and around to the advance of the gospel over many generations and across the nations.

Objection 13: This is no different from a Muslim arguing for Sharia law

This will be addressed in more detail below but it should be noted that this objection is founded upon a sort of “moral equivalence” argument which unnecessarily troubles many Christians who have been indoctrinated by the State and morally fashioned by the humanist media into self-suspicion and moral timidity. The form of the argument leads to the idea that blessing and cursing are very little different because they both involve speaking words; or that poison and medicine are very little different because they both come in little white powders; or that racism and stopping at red traffic lights are very little different because they both involve acting on the basis of colour discrimination. The fact that there are some structural similarities between Christian commitment to the confessional state and Muslim commitment to the confessional state does not mean that they are not diametrically opposed to one another: one is founded upon the righteous recognition of the truth that Jesus is Lord and the other upon wicked adherence to the lie that there is one God, Allah, and that Muhammed is his prophet.

This is the line of argument which tells us that doctrinal discrimination is the Inquisition, that prison is slavery, and that loving corporal discipline is violent abuse. Christians “sound like” Muslim fundamentalists when they say “God is great” or when they say “the true God is the source of everything good and must be obeyed in every detail of life” but this is no cause for alarm. Christians “look like” Muslim fundamentalists when they have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. In response it could be claimed that some Christians “sound like” atheist humanists and liberal statist when they insist that religion in the public square is a dangerous thing. But the argument itself is flawed: similarity of form must not be confused with identity of substance.

Objection 14: Pluralistic liberal democracy works fine.

It will be shown below that liberal democracy is intrinsically tyrannical but it is a fact that some people living under liberal democracies have enjoyed relatively stable and comfortable social and political experiences. We need to note, however, that any good to be found under such arrangements of the state exists simply because God in his mercy keeps unbelievers and unbelieving ways of arranging human life from the full consistency which would be as horrible and disastrous as life could be this side of hell.

We have actually never seen the political house which liberal democracy builds. Liberal democracy in the post-Enlightenment West has constructed nothing but simply squatted in the house which Christianity built. Imagine arriving at a person's house and finding it in reasonable shape although it does have some roof tiles off and there's a large hole in one wall. You see a man – "Liberal Democracy" standing there with bricks in his hands and tools and machines all around him. You are arriving at the arrangement of the state in the United Kingdom in 2007. But you would be badly mistaken if you were to say, "this is a fine house that "Liberal Democracy" has built for you," because the fact is that the house was built some generations ago by "Christian" and what is really happening is that "Liberal Democracy" is dismantling it as fast as he can even while claiming the credit for the safety and comfort still to be had in the house. Liberal democracy, as has often been observed, is parasitical and destructive, simultaneously living off the benefits of the influence of the gospel in previous generations *and* working hard to remove them *and* claiming credit for putting them in place.

Objection 15: Put a confessionally Christian state in place and you will end up with horrible intolerance and with punishing people for their beliefs.

John Coffey describes how *Lex, rex* is experienced as an "ambiguous book" by modern readers:

On the one hand, Rutherford's arguments for popular sovereignty, the rule of law, and the right of resistance to tyranny, remind us of Locke, and can lead to the impression that the author of *Lex, Rex* was something of a modern liberal. On the other hand, his desire for a covenanted nation purged of heresy, idolatry

and unbelief, makes him appear thoroughly reactionary, utterly committed to the ideals of Christendom.¹²

In fact, Rutherford does not suggest for a moment that the state has the right to try to dictate what men and women should or should not believe, far less “impose” beliefs upon people. He does believe that it is legitimate for the state to impose negative sanctions upon the public, proveable expression of opinions which are harmful to others even though those opinions may be conscientiously held.¹³ But this “intolerance” is not exclusive to the confessionally Christian state. If, in our society someone declares publicly and tries to persuade others to believe, for example, that all faithful Muslims will burn eternally in hell; that God hates homosexual sexual activity and everyone who engages in it and does not repent will burn eternally in hell; that people of ethnic group X are of lower intelligence than those of ethnic group Y and are designed by nature to be their servants; or that God created the world in six days something less than 10,000 years ago, then they will experience state-imposed or state-approved negative sanctions ranging from exclusion from public office or a job with the police through to time in prison. The question is not, therefore, whether some behaviours, including the public expression of some conscientiously held beliefs are not legally tolerated. The question is on what this intolerance is based, a matter which will be addressed below.

Objection 16: There are too many detailed questions of biblical exegesis and of public policy to deal with.

What would be the punishment for identity theft or for intellectual property theft through the internet? Would it be legal for Muslims to build a mosque or to preach in the open air? Would everyone be forced to attend church? How would Deuteronomy 13 apply in a state with a Christian constitution? In which activities is a Christian state, as the state, forbidden, allowed, and mandated to engage? What if other agencies and institutions fail? How should Christian ‘establishment’ be recognized? Which churches would be recognized as ‘Christian’ and who would decide?

¹² Coffey, *Politics*, 187.

¹³ Rutherford, *Free Disputation*, 57-60.

These questions are asked as though, unless an answer can be given to them *today*, the entire idea of a confessional Christian state would be undermined. This is a nonsense. There is a vast and beautiful city on a hill and we are climbing towards it. We see the outline of this city and we see that all alternative destinations are ugly and dangerous places. Currently we are hundreds and hundreds of miles away from the city. Should we really curtail our journey just because we are unable to answer questions about the colour of certain doors in the back streets of one quarter, or name the flowers in the window-boxes on the other side of the city from us?

A confessionally Christian state is not going to be established in England for hundreds of years although we praise God for the possibility that we will see kings as kings bowing down before the Lord Jesus in other countries before then. But although we cannot see the details, the outlines are clear. There is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His Word, the Bible is true and authoritative. The Lord Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth and is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Governments are servants of God, ministers of vengeance, accountable to God to rule according to his will in acknowledgement of the Lordship of Jesus. For now, that is enough.

Alternatives to the Confessionally Christian State

As mentioned above, all law is imposed morality. All governments, that is, forbid some behaviours on pain of state-imposed negative sanctions. And these behaviours are declared to be “wrong” (as revealed precisely by the state’s imposition of those negative sanctions).

This identification of “right” and “wrong” by the state is, however, based upon some ethical authority. The state imposes its morality and this morality comes from somewhere. The rival ethical authorities are rival bases for law and include force (“might is right”), the will of the majority, intuition, personal preference, tradition, perceived past evolutionary advantage, what “all decent people” believe and so on.

When the questions, “why?” and “how do you know?” and “but what lies behind *that*?” are pressed then we will arrive at the ultimate ethical authority for a person or group of

persons, including the state. And a person's ultimate ethical authority *is* his god, the incontestible determiner of good and evil, the one beyond whom appeal cannot be made. Rushdoony made these points well:

Every state is a law order, and every law order represents an enacted morality, with procedures for the enforcement of that morality. Every morality represents a form of theological order, i.e., is an aspect and expression of a religion. The church thus is not the only religious institution; the state also is a religious institution. ... in any culture the source of law is the god of that society.¹⁴

This being the case, in our public theology we may worship (by recognizing as the ultimate ethical authority for the imposed morality which is the law) the true God, or a false god, or several gods, or no god. Having given some attention to the confessionally Christian state, that is, a state which has a constitution which explicitly acknowledges the true God as the ultimate ethical authority, we move to consider three possible alternatives to the confessionally Christian state: an explicitly non-Christian confessional state, such as a consistent Muslim would seek; a putatively non-confessional state, such as the humanistic pluralists claim to have; and the mixed and muted confession of "principled pluralists" which neither denies nor constitutionally acknowledges the universal exclusively ultimate rule of Jesus.

In what follows, then, the "constitution" is simply a shorthand for "the declared basis upon which the state is arranged and the criteria by which this or that behaviour is required or forbidden by the state". The argument below is *not* about the procedures or mechanics of drafting or adopting a Christian constitution in a particular country but is an exercise in public *theology*, examining the theoretical options for the arrangement of the state in regard to its worship of the true God, a false god, no god, or several gods.

a) A false confession: the idolatry of radical Islam

Islam quite openly acknowledges the need for a confessional state. It quite openly declares that all the nations of the world should now and one day will have constitutions

¹⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *Christianity and the State*, (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1986) 7; R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 4.

which contain that confession. It insists that the statute-book reflect accurately and consistently what is in the confessional constitution.¹⁵ And Islam then announces an idolatrous confession, one which denies the one true triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which denies that the Bible is the altogether true, sufficient and authoritative Word of God and which denies that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God crucified and risen, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Islam rebels against the truth of God and replaces it with a lie and its proposed arrangement of the state is founded upon a false and idolatrous confession. Because Islam is a lie it is also incompetent, sterile, and violent, which is heartening, even though the Lord may use it as an instrument of judgment upon the apostate West. And, of course, it remains amusing to watch the secular humanists torn between their multiculturalist approval of Islam on the one hand and their politically correct disapproval of Islam's treatment of women, system of punishment, attitude to homosexual behaviour, and disdain for democracy on the other.

b) No favoured confession: the tyranny of humanistic pluralism

We move to that very humanistic pluralist, a supporter of liberal democracy, proudly claiming that modern society is committed to tolerance and diversity. Such a person will further claim that when it comes to the arrangement of the state no ideology is privileged. Things are not quite so simple though and I have numbered the component parts of the argument in order to make it easier to follow. I have also chosen to use the shorthand 'covenanter' to stand for the proponent of a confessionally Christian state founded upon an explicitly Christian constitution.

- a) First, a distinction must be made between the constitution (the ideological or confessional basis for the arrangement of the state which amounts to the identification of the ultimate ethical authority, the groundedness of declaring that certain behaviours are right and certain behaviours are wrong) on the one hand, and

¹⁵ For modern examples and bibliographical help see popular analyses of political Islam such as David Selbourne, *The Losing Battle with Islam* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005); Mark Steyn, *America Alone*, (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006); Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2006).

the statute-book (the list of behaviours which are legally required and forbidden) on the other hand.

- b) Neither the pluralist nor the covenanter believes in an empty statute-book: they both believe that certain human behaviours are to be forbidden and, if engaged in should draw down negative sanctions. Murder is an obvious example.
- c) Neither the pluralist nor the covenanter believes that the statute-book should cover every single human action: they both believe that there are areas of human behaviour where there should be toleration, i.e., if you look up this topic in the statute-book you will find nothing: the state will impose no sanctions, negative or positive, in relation to this action. Which football team a person supports, a person's views of his own cleverness or handsomeness, or which colour toothbrush a person uses might fall into this category.
- d) So the pluralist and the covenanter both believe in the criminalization of some activities and in the toleration of some activities. (And the covenanter believes that there will be many sins – such as pride, untidy bedrooms, impatience and *most* other sinful human behaviours – amongst the tolerated actions).
- e) What pluralists and covenanters disagree about, then, is *how to determine* which activities should be criminal and which should be tolerated. And the criterion which they apply and the authority to which they appeal is, in effect, what they write in their constitution.
- f) The *ultimate* constitutional pluralist would write “everyone is right and no-one is right and none of us can ever know for sure” in his constitution. This is a refusal to choose between the gods, to give preference to one ultimate authority claim over others. But it is also a refusal to identify a criterion against which to make decisions as to what is right or wrong, or, more relevantly, to determine what should be in the statute-book.

- g) This means *either* that the statute-book of the ultimate constitutionalist pluralist is empty *or* that those things it contains are there arbitrarily. If there are no grounds whatever upon which decisions as to what should and should not be put in the statute-book can be based, then plainly the criminalization of some activities and toleration of others is both arbitrary and unstable.
- h) But the arbitrary, unstable and ungrounded criminalization of certain behaviours is tyrannical. The ultimately pluralist state requires and forbids behaviour on no grounds at all – that is tyranny. What starts by looking very tolerant – the refusal to favour any ideology at the constitutional level – ends by being arbitrary and tyrannical. Only a confessional state – one which has some moral *reason* for criminalizing some behaviours and tolerating others – avoids tyranny.
- i) At this point the constitutional pluralist might retreat somewhat and declare that he *does* have a confession but that it is one which does not decide between competing religious claims. His constitution (confession) might say, “We will not take a view upon whether Jesus is Lord and the Bible is sufficient, nor upon Allah and Muhammed, nor upon ... but we will proceed on the basis of X”. This might be regarded as *intermediate* constitutional pluralism or constitutionalism pluralism *lite*.
- j) However, it is not hard to see where this leads. Two questions arise. Firstly, what grounds the decision “not to take a view upon whether Jesus is Lord”? Secondly, what is X? It may well be that the answer to each of these two questions is the same – they are, after all, authority questions. Even if the answers to these two questions are not the same initially, sooner or later, *either* one will lead to the other as the *ultimate* authority *or* they will both lead to the identification of another ultimate authority.
- k) And *this* ultimate authority, this X, has now become the confessional basis for the arrangement of the state. Possible Xs include, “what all major religions agree on”; “what all decent people think”; “what commands majority support at election time”;

“what the expert ethics committees recommend”; “what the random-answer-generator produces each Wednesday lunchtime”.

- l) Thus *either* the humanistic pluralist is consistent with his claim not to have a confessional state (to have an empty public square and to be non-ideological) in which case he is arbitrary and tyrannical *or* he is inconsistent with that claim and proves not to be the pluralist he thought he was. And at that point we are no longer in the business of deciding between “confession or no confession?” but rather in the business of deciding “which confession?”. The inconsistent humanist pluralist, the intermediate constitutional pluralist has a false confession. The consistent humanist pluralist, the ultimate constitutional pluralist, who initially looks so tolerant, actually proves to be a tyrant.

- m) The covenanter, on the other hand, may start the exercise looking terribly intolerant by declaring that his ideological basis for the arrangement of the state is the fact that “the Triune God is maker, ruler and judge of all things, the Bible is his infallible and sufficient Word, the Lord Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth and the civil government is God’s servant, an avenger of his wrath on the evil-doer.” However, when *on the basis of the Bible* he then goes on to declare that murder should be criminalized whereas pride and untidy bedrooms and lust and recreational use of cannabis, though sinful, should not, that is built on a public, wise, righteous and fitting foundation, namely the revealed will of God in the Bible.

- n) The apparently generous constitutional pluralist is a tyrant and the toleration he offers is arbitrary and unstable; the apparently narrow covenanter actually requires, forbids, and tolerates behaviours on a firm and righteous basis – the revealed will of the triune Creator.

- o) Humanistic constitutional pluralism is unstable: either it opts for an ideological basis (it goes intermediate and confesses its ‘god’) and so ceases to be constitutional pluralism or it refuses to confess its ‘god’ in which case it makes whoever manages

to have power at the moment the god – an inscrutable, unaccountable, arbitrary and thus tyrannical god.

Even in this mess, there is much reason to give thanks to God. In his mercy he keeps back the unregenerate from consistency with their presuppositions and a large part of humanist inconsistency is its use of stolen Christian goods. Admittedly, as we saw above, this is confusing because it can give the false impression, in the short term of three or four generations, that humanist pluralism can actually work! This God-granted inconsistency of the humanists is also a mercy to others because it means that life is not as bad as it might be even in a gospel-rejecting country. And there is further encouragement in the thought that the more consistent humanists become, the less effectively they will function in God's world.¹⁶

c) A mixed and muted confession: the confusion of Christian “principled pluralism”

It is not an easy matter to define Christian “principled pluralism” but there are three things that it might mean.

First, Christian “principled pluralism” might mean the proposal that a state has a Christian confession combined with wide definitions of “toleration”. Such a proposal may arise out of a misplaced fear that espousal of full-blooded Christian confessionalism involves commitment to a particularly small number of tolerated behaviours or to the enforcement of personal Christian confession or suchlike. This, however, is not a distinct position, it is simply a variant of Christian confessionalism because it assumes that explicit acknowledgement of the triune God, the lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture forms the proper constitutional foundation for the state. It differs from other Christian confessionalisms not at the level of the “constitution” (identification of the ultimate ethical authority) but at the level of the “statute-book” (making specific moves, on the basis of the ultimate ethical authority, to

¹⁶ The argument advanced above is best related to Rutherford's own work through what he says about the formal cause of government in chapters XXII to XXVII. Rutherford argues that what makes government government is its submissive and subordinate embodiment of the law of God. His argument is developed in terms of the “law” and the “king” along similar lines to those of the argument above where reference has been to the “confession/constitution” and the “statute-book”.

criminalizing some behaviours and tolerating others). This version of “principled pluralism” actually desires a confessionally Christian state and simply needs to hold discussions with others who have the same desire about what Scripture, rightly read, teaches should be on the “statute-book”. It argues not that there is more than one ultimate ethical authority but rather that that ultimate ethical authority (the God who speaks in Scripture) requires wider “statute-book” toleration than it fears other Christian confessionalisms allow.

Secondly, and just conceivably, some Christian “principled pluralists” might occupy the same ground (in respect of the public square) as ultimate constitutional pluralists, claiming that we should have an “empty public square”, that is, no recognition of an ultimate ethical authority for the actions of the state. These Christians would gladly affirm that the triune God is the true God, that Jesus is Lord, and that the Bible is authoritative but they would claim that a proper reading of the Bible teaches that these things should not be authoritatively (constitutionally) affirmed in the public square. They believe that although the triune God is the true God, that Jesus is Lord, and that the Bible is authoritative, God does not want nations as political entities and governments as law-making bodies to acknowledge this. However, this is not a distinct position: it is the same as humanistic pluralism and subject to the same criticisms (see above).

Thirdly, some Christian “principled pluralists” might recognize the need for a confession (the state’s explicit identification of the ethical authority for its actions) but deny that such a confession should be explicitly or exclusively Christian. At the level of the confession, favour should not be extended to one particular god. It asserts that there could be multiple, contradictory but legitimate, theologically grounded ideological *bases* for what identifying right and wrong. That is, no decision will be made between Islam, Judaism, atheism, and Christianity, for example, but nevertheless, murder will be forbidden.

The weakness of this position has already been exposed under headings i) to k) of the previous section. This position calls itself “pluralist” because it allows a number of

distinct confessions together to form the basis of the state. In reality, however, this amounts to the identification of a common denominator confession, the X of section i) above.

For a number of reasons it is a dismal thing when Christians adopt this position. Firstly, the “pluralist” confession of such a view in effect asserts that there is a part of life in which we are not to affirm that Jesus is Lord and/or that there is a part of life in which we can operate well (effectively and faithfully) while not taking a view upon whether or not Jesus is Lord. This means that operationally and ideologically this sphere (the sphere in which the “we should not or do not need to confess that Jesus is Lord” confession holds) is idolatrous and/or polytheistic because in this sphere, Jesus is lord along with other lords.

It also means that there are whole areas of activity and thought (wherever the various acknowledged lords disagree) on which no judgment is given. That is, there may be something which King Jesus declares to be a crime but which the state is not to declare to be a crime because Baal or Isis or Allah disagree with Jesus. False gods have a veto on the wishes of the true God.

And if the state continues to give no judgment in these areas then it *has* actually moved to a confession. If it gives a judgment in an area of life over which the various acknowledged lords disagree then it *either* sides against Jesus, in which case it has left X and adopted a false confession *or* it sides with Jesus, in which case it has left X and adopted a Christian confession.

This will not do. The X which Christian “principled pluralists” (Christian versions of the *intermediate* constitutional pluralists above) attempt to confess is not (by definition) an explicit recognition of the exclusive and universal lordship of Jesus and is therefore a false confession. It is unstable and must resolve either into the tyranny of no confession, the idolatry of false confession, or the no-longer-pluralism of true Christian confession. X conflicts with the biblical data that all nations and rulers are subject to Christ and

must acknowledge that (Psalm 2; Psalm 72; Daniel 2 and 4; Matthew 28; Romans 13; Philippians 2; Colossians 1; Revelation 1).

And when we ask what, precisely X is and where it comes from, the answer usually resolves into some version of natural law. This might be framed in terms of “the common ground between the world’s major religions” or in terms of “what all right-thinking people agree upon” but natural law is what it is. The problem with this, of course, is that a “natural law” which conflicts with the Bible comes from our sinful hearts not from the general revelation of the God who speaks consistently; and a “natural law” which tells us that there are parts of life over which Jesus is not to be confessed as Lord nor the Bible acknowledged as his Word, parts of life in which we can function in a way pleasing to God without Jesus-Bible acknowledgement and dependence is Satanic.

There are three versions of natural law argument we should take into account.¹⁷ One version is founded upon the separation of the realm of nature and the realm of grace and asserts that since nature has not been as badly damaged by sin as others think then the unregenerate can function effectively in the nature ‘compartment’ in certain matters and we can talk to them using ‘nature’ language and arguments.

A second version is founded upon the separation of the law and the gospel and asserts that there are two ‘kingdoms’, one associated with the law and one with the gospel. Although we want everyone personally to move from law to gospel and thus into the kingdom of light yet a part of human life is always to be a ‘law’ part – the civil, extra-ecclesial part of life. The gospel makes no difference to the operation of that part of life because it is a separate ‘kingdom’ as ordered by God.

The third version of natural law argument is founded upon the separation of creation and redemption as historical realms of God’s involvement with humankind. Even though the fall has spoiled things, yet there is creation or common grace which is a discernible residue of creation realities according to which people can still think,

¹⁷ See Dan Strange’s chapter earlier in this book for a more thorough analysis and for bibliographical leads.

communicate, and function. Redemption restores creation but before and apart from redemption there is creation grace and even after and with redemption for an individual there are still parts of human existence which are unaddressed by redemption revelation and thus to be lived by creation grace.

What these three have in common is that the world or human existence is divided into spheres or realms, that it is possible for the unregenerate to function in the lower- or prior-realm in some matters, and inevitable that some parts of life will continue to be ordered by lower- or prior-realm principles even for the regenerate. Being human is all that is required to get by reasonably in these parts of life.

This means that according to these theories we can address issues in a nature / law / creation sort of way without needing (theologically or rhetorically) to talk about Jesus or the Bible.

Over against all this stands full-blooded Christian confessionalism, what might be called theocratic, whole-Bible presuppositionalism, which asserts that there is no division in human life because every piece of territory and aspect of life is owned by and under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and every human activity is definitely and sufficiently addressed by the Bible. There are not “non-Jesus” or “non-Bible” parts of human existence. There are unregenerate people but they manage to survive, communicate, function in some sense as human beings *not* because they live in a distinct (“merely” nature / law / creation) sphere but because, rebels though they are, they live with the overspill of Jesus-Bible rule or by stealing Jesus-Bible things or by adopting Jesus-Bible ways. When they do this they are being inconsistent with their true (Jesus/Bible-hating) selves and yet this is the only way that they function at all as humans.

That is, the true government over *everything* is Jesus-Bible government. The Jesus-Bible government provides air and water for all in its territory. There are quite a few people who hold out against the rightful authority of this Jesus-Bible government and yet they do so while using Jesus-Bible air and water. They function as human beings not by living in a different territory or under a different government but precisely because of

Jesus-Bible rule.

For the loyal subjects of the Jesus-Bible realm to try to help the rebels but not mention Jesus or the Bible is a dishonour to the rightful King and no help at all to these rebels because it reinforces their sense that they have found a little corner where Jesus-Bible does not rule and yet where they seem to get along alright.

There is one world and there is one government. Some people live according to that. Others refuse to recognize it and live as though there were other governments (ways of being human) than the Jesus-Bible way. They get away with this because operationally in some matters they live the Jesus-Bible way even while declaring that they do not. It helps them not at all to teach them the falsehood that actually there are two legitimate governments and that while (some aspects of) life can be better under Jesus-Bible government, nevertheless the other (nature/law/creation) government does have legitimacy.

This being the case, it is worth asking why some Christians persist in their appeal to X (whether labelled “natural law” or “common denominator confessionism” or “what the major world religions have in common” or something else). If the answers have to do with gaining a hearing or broadening the appeal of the Christian contribution to political debate then the question arises whether in gaining the hearing the “principled pluralist” has muted the message. If to gain a hearing for the gospel we have to agree not to mention the name of Jesus then it is not the gospel which will be heard. If the reason for appealing to X and asserting that no exclusive confession should form the constitution is a short-term tactical move (like Christians claiming tax-relief or freedom of religion) then it is important not to forget that such a political cease-fire holds only until “one side is ready to resume the fight to the death”.

Summary and conclusion

In summary, we have stated in this chapter that Samuel Rutherford's view of government amounts to a demand for a confessionally Christian state, a covenanted nation. We have explored a little of what that means, responded to the most common objections to it, and evaluated the three current alternatives to a confessionally Christian state. The first alternative, that of Islam and other false religions, is a false confession and is idolatrous. The second alternative, that of humanistic pluralism, is no-confession and is tyrannical. The third alternative, that of Christian "principled pluralism", is of multiple confessions and is confused and unstable, either giving unbelief a veto or resolving into the tyranny or idolatry of the other positions, or, blessedly, abandoning "pluralism" and joining Christian confessionalism.

To those who respond that this is not a 'gospel' matter and that it should be no concern of ours, the reply is simple. Graeme Goldsworthy reminds us that "the gospel is the proclamation of what God has done in Christ, and needs always to be distinguished from the fruit of the gospel, which is God's work in those who believe." It is clear, even from mere lexical studies,¹⁸ that "what God has done in Christ" (and is therefore announced in the gospel), is bring about the end of the old regime and establish the new, accomplishing dynastic transfer so that rule has passed to the rightful Lord whose empire will dwarf all previous empires and whose kingdom shall have no end. Once we understand the inescapably "political" dimension to the gospel which is summed up in the words, "Jesus is Lord", then we see that what humanism, false religions, and inconsistent Christian confessions do is deny or dilute the gospel. And we will further see that a proper part of gospel commitment is our recognition and our desire that the state should be confessionally Christian.

The words of the Lord Jesus Christ may be applied to societies as well as to individuals:

¹⁸ See the general usage of the "evangel" words in the Septuagint associated with the death of the old and the accession of new king and with the beginning of new rule I Sam 31:9; II Sam 1:20, 4:10, 18:19,20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 31; I Kings 1:42; II Kings 7:9; I Chron 10:9; Ps 40:9; Ps 68:11; Ps 96:2; Jer 20:15; Nah 1:15. See also how in Isaiah God arrives, redeems, reigns, how he rules to save and so on: Is 40:9; Is 52:7; Is 60:6; Is 61:1. Compare this with use of the "evangel" words in first century Rome – good news of a global Lord, divine Son, and cosmic Saviour and the reflection of this in important New Testament texts - Mark 1.1, 1.14-15; Romans 1.1, 1.15-17. For more detail see <http://www.davidpfield.com/other/Evangel+.pdf>

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

If a nation builds its house on the sand of a false confession then it will be destroyed. If a nation attempts to build its house in the air of no confession then the house will come down to earth – onto rock or sand. If a nation attempts to build half on the sand and half on the rock or on the mud in between (“principled pluralism”) then it cannot stay there but must decide on the foundation it really seeks and its destiny will follow from that. But the obvious application of Matthew 7.24-27 to the political foundation of societies is “build your house, that is, arrange your state on the rock of Jesus and his words.” Samuel Rutherford and the consistently Reformed tradition of political thought which has followed him have, by arguing for and seeking the covenanted nation of a confessionally Christian state, helped us understand better what it will mean to do just that.

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