

**A Place at the Table:
Christian Political Engagement in a Post-Christian Context
Richard L. Smith**

European Review Of Theology (January 2018; 42:1, 57-64)

Richard Smith (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) formerly taught in Prague, Czech Republic and was a co-founder of the Komenský Institute there. He now serves as South American senior advisor for Global Scholars, writes curriculum for use in Latin America, and operates the Cosmovisión Bíblica Spanish-language website (www.cosmovisionbiblicaesp.net).

Imagine several chairs around a table. Each chair represents an irreconcilable position, a worldview that rejects on principle the other perspectives. The table represents common concerns or the presupposed commonalities between all positions.

Those commonalities are actually quite extensive. People who hold what may seem to be diametrically opposed worldviews almost always agree, for example, that their society needs reliable food sources to keep people from starving and a protective force that can ensure their public safety, as well as on certain legal and ethical assumptions. This presumed common ground between worldviews provides a basis for political and social engagement for the common good.

But the table is also a place where each player competes for power. Each worldview tends towards dominance and tribalism, routinely seeking to exclude others from influence.

Liberals exclude conservatives. Secularists exclude persons of religious conviction. Straights exclude gays. Traditionalists reject feminists. The wealthy overlook the poor. Whites exclude minorities. The young disregard the elderly. The educated ignore the ignorant. And just about everyone tends to overlook the powerless and disadvantaged.

What might happen if Christians could uniquely promote and model the virtues of cooperative table participation—respect, empathy, access, and tolerance? What if we were explicitly willing to share power for the common good?

Amidst the post-Christian transformation of many cultures worldwide, evangelicals need to reconsider whether the goal of their public engagement should be to define their culture in accordance with a biblical worldview.

What if, instead, we focused on championing an open table in which all legitimate viewpoints are included? Every worldview presumes a social, economic, legal, ethical, intellectual, educational and environmental context for collaboration for the common good. Every worldview offers insights regarding these often unspoken commonalities that are required for constructive communication and mutual benefit.

What if we sought to cooperate with other worldviews based upon a deeper, broader common ground than personal salvation or Christian culture? What if we sought to be a blessing

to all, derived from general revelation and common grace? What if we engaged in social discourse and public advocacy based upon a careful analysis of the entire biblical worldview, including creation (Genesis 1–2) and restoration (Revelation 20–21) and not merely the fall into sin and personal redemption (Genesis 3–Revelation 19)?

I. The Presuppositions of Table Participation

What is the presupposed commonality of table participation? Various assumed conditions are necessary to enable any encounter between worldviews. Even before we argue or reject, welcome or exclude, wield power or share it, we presuppose many critical social, existential and ontological realities.

When you enter a building, you assume that the structure is secure. When you eat at your favourite restaurant, you assume that the kitchen is clean and sanitary. Before you begin arguing with your opponent, you assume a common language, logical and grammatical norms, conscious and sane minds, and an at least partly shared sense of right and wrong.

When we schedule a meeting at the table, we presume all the necessary conditions for travel to and for communication at the location. We also presuppose the legal and moral norms that enable mutual access and protection. We presume both the validity of our perspective and the dignity of those representing other perspectives.

The common good, then, encompasses the network of underlying preconditions that facilitate table fellowship. These conditions must exist *before* any political and social engagement that aims to achieve mutual understanding and agreement and thereby extend the common good further.

For this reason, each table participant is a stakeholder in the preconditions that foster human rights, freedom of religion and worldview, legal norms and law enforcement, economic and educational opportunity, environmental wholeness, public works, and the provisions that enable human beings to flourish. These commonalities are presupposed by every worldview, even those that are irreconcilable in other aspects. This common ground is presumed and required for dialogue and collaboration. It is the necessary surface upon which the table and chairs rest.

II. Applying a Biblical Worldview to the Table

1. The age to come

God's mission in creation is the same as it was in the beginning: to prepare a realm and community for his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:22–26). Because of God's great love, he created a physical environment in which to tabernacle with the crown of creation, mankind. Ever since the entrance of sin, all that God does is redemptive and re-creative, seeking to make us holy so that we can dwell with Him in a holy environment forever (Tit 2:11–14).

The incarnation, ministry, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ enable this plan to succeed, because Christ will finish the work that Adam failed to do. The project manager, so to speak, is the Holy Spirit, who will bring about restoration in a ‘new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet 3:13). In other words, one day, God will unveil His cosmic empire, a homeland free of sin and Satan in which human beings can truly flourish through Christ, their redeemer and Lord.

God is in the process of populating his church, and someday there will be a cosmic reversal. God will dwell with us forever in his kingdom: the everlasting tabernacle, the entire earth, the renewed creation. We look forward to Eden restored to its greatest potential, a nexus of divine presence, peace, and prosperity forever.

Until this time, every re-enactment of gospel love and every manifestation of economic and social justice in this life point forward to the restoration and reversal yet to come in God’s cosmic empire. In the meantime, however, we must share this planet until the Lord returns. If it prospers, we also prosper. If it suffers, we also suffer, ‘for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (Jer 29:7).

2. The present evil age

Both biblical revelation and personal experience constantly remind us that God’s edenic plan was interrupted by the stratagems of Satan and the advent of sin. We now live in this ‘present evil age’ (Gal 1:4) or ‘under the sun’ (Eccl 1:3). Concurrent with God’s re-creative mission, Satan attempts to create a counterfeit kingdom with himself as the head, ruling over fallen mankind in a curse-filled physical environment.

The expulsion from Eden and the resulting curse mean hostility and frustration, ambivalence and enigma in every arena of existence (Gen 3:14–19; Mk 7:21–22; Rom 1:28–32). Cultural and civilizational development is skewed by sin and idolatry. Humans try to replicate Eden and re-establish a religious centre, but often settle for visions of utopia, theocracy, unending progress and empire.

We are by nature worshipping beings, *homo adorans*. Sadly though, this spiritual orientation is often directed to unworthy objects (would-be god-kings) and destructive purposes (ideologies of acquisition and empire, for example). God expects his human stewards to protect and develop creation, but sadly, they often abuse and neglect the natural world and one another.

We use creation positively to make great things from the raw material God has provided: artwork, architecture, artificial limbs, and software. But we often fail to extend the benefits of this creativity and productivity fairly to everyone who has a need or right. Similarly, the cultures and societies we create often have cruel, unjust and oppressive aspects.

The drastic changes introduced in Genesis 3 as result of sin and judgement amount to a reversal of creation. The mission of fallen mankind is the re-creation and globalization of the divine milieu (Eden)—but on sinful assumptions. All our cultural policy and practice, production and consumption are twisted and problematic. Our economic systems are often tainted by

idolatry and corruption. As we extend our economic prowess, the result is often conquest, oppression and exploitation.

Thus, we must be realists and permit our worldview to shape our cultural expectations: before the end of this age, Humpty Dumpty will not be put back together again.

3. Common grace

However, the creator did not abandon the creation or his mission. God ‘has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy’ (Acts 14:17; cf. Mt 5:45). In the interim period between creation and the ‘renewal of all things’ (Mt 19:28), God’s common grace makes life bearable, even sweet.

Common grace in culture restrains evil. Generally, we are not as bad as we could be. In fact, we sometimes do much better than expected. Through common grace, God enables human beings to develop technologies and systems to better humanity’s lot. Through common grace, civic institutions and public policy restrain evil. Compassion and care are extended to the community. Humankind manifests artistry of all types: beauty in the arts, utility in science and technology.

Most importantly, because of common grace, the world does not self-destruct, enabling God’s redemptive and restorative plan to unfold within history. As a result, although the post-fall situation is typified by trauma and paradox, at the same time the world explodes with God’s mercy and human beings are enabled to achieve noble aspirations.

We sometimes witness, for example, extraordinary deeds of beneficence, stewardship and economic justice. Sometimes the wealthy share their resources with amazing abundance and creativity. Sometimes armed forces refrain from pillage and plunder, and nations from colonial exploitation. Sometimes states enact sustainable policies that protect and care for the needy, as well as the earth.

III. Implications

1. The cultural mandate (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15)

First, east of Eden and under the sun, the human project is clearly flawed. Existence is conditioned by finitude, fallenness and God’s curse (Gen 3:14–19; Ps 90).

In this present evil age, utopia will never be achieved through any ideology or worldview: communism or socialism, democracy, capitalism or consumerism, Islam or any of the myriad alternative spiritualities. Never will there be a truly ‘Holy (fill in the blank) Empire’.

History is full of failed and tragic experiments in culture building, a litany of tragic quests for paradise lost or for utopia on earth. Humans create endless substitute religiosities, group

identities and social policies, many of which deserve description as a kind of hell on earth, a foretaste of dreadful things to come.

Second, because human beings are the *imago Dei*, we are hard-wired for extension, development, growth, even globalization. But because we are fallen, the usual results are conquest, empire, mono-culturalism, subjugation, exploitation, plunder and extinction. By necessity and design we must consume, but in today's economy, consumption has become a kind of plunder and an implicit religion. 'God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes' (Eccl 7:29).

Third, Christians should be continuously wary of sinful incarnations of the cultural mandate gone awry. Whenever we hear a neo-Babelite battle cry, 'Let us build ourselves a city ... that we can make a name for ourselves' (Gen 11:4); whenever would-be Pharaohs exclaim, 'Who is the Lord?' (Ex 5:2); whenever God's people mix political power and religion, declaring, 'Give us a king to lead us' (1 Sam 8:19–20); or whenever an ideology proposes utopia, the church should take heed.

Whether the impetus behind such cries is religious or philosophical, the social and economic manifestations are usually totalitarian. The forms can be explicitly religious (theocracies like radical Islam, medieval Catholicism or even forms of early Protestantism), ideologically secular (totalitarianisms such as communism, National Socialism, Imperial Japan or North Korean Juche), or implicitly religious (secularism or consumerism).

Fourth, since God is the creator and householder of all that exists, every sphere of life, every aspect of existence, and every goal, motivation, structure, academic discipline, ideology and system must be evaluated in relation to Scripture and the mission of God. Everything we do culturally occurs within the context of sin, but also within common grace and the divine plan. This context affords us redemptive opportunities and areas of common ground that we should embrace for the sake of God's mission in creation.

Fifth, we must never forget that anything we do as sinners is problematic. Everything and everyone in this age is subject to Murphy's Law and to the law of unintended consequences.

Finally, our interest in promoting constructive table participation should drive us to consider what actions could facilitate such participation. Are the roads safe to travel? Are the logistics of communication adequate? Is the immediate location safe and healthy? Does everyone associated with the endeavour have fair and just access to material resources and social services? Are equity, opportunity and justice available for each participant?

Regarding the subjective conditions necessary (respect, empathy, access and tolerance), we should approach the table like missionaries engaging a foreign culture. What cultural biases do I and others bring to the table? How were my assumptions and theirs formed? Is there any validity in their critique of my position? How are the virtues of table participation reflected in my attitudes and behaviour towards others who sometimes vehemently disagree with me?

2. Exiles and pilgrims

Jeremiah's counsel to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon (Jer 29:4–14) is wise and useful in helping us to consider how we can pursue common ground and the common good in a pluralistic, often post-Christian context:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream. ... I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ... I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

In this passage, Jeremiah calls for submission to God's sovereignty over human history and the wisdom of His mission. The Jews were not instructed to resist with force of arms, attempt a precipitous return to Israel, or even proselytize the Babylonians in search of cultural dominance. Instead, their sustainability relied upon critical engagement and maintaining their distinct identity as pilgrims within God's long-term plan. This is apparent in the negative injunctions in the text: 'Do not let your prophets and your diviners ... deceive you' and 'do not listen to the dreams that they dream' (v. 8).

The Jews were commanded to take what they would have considered counter-intuitive actions: 'seek the welfare of the city' and 'pray to the LORD on its behalf' (v. 7). The rationale provided was that 'in its welfare you will find your welfare'.

In fact, Jeremiah encouraged his listeners to prosper and flourish in exile. This is clear from the positive injunctions: build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have sons and daughters, multiply there (vv. 5–6). The broader context of the passage expresses hope for future renewal and restoration (vv. 11–14).

Thematically, the parallel between their day and ours is striking. The Jews were in exile, longing for restoration and a return to the promised land; in the meantime, they were tempted to assimilate and syncretize with Babylon. We too are in a sort of exile, longing for cultural restoration and challenged by forces of assimilation.

The Jews were instructed to flourish in their place of exile (common ground), for their own benefit as well as that of their captors (common good), and as a foretaste of better things to come. We should do the same. As we do so, we must never forget that we are ambassadors for another nation, a cosmic civilization, and another epoch. Heaven is our home and we are pilgrims and exiles here.

3. A guiding strategy

Our biblical worldview must mould our social and political expectations. We must never forget our presuppositions derived from Scripture. We should embrace biblical realism and eschatological hope in the present evil age and under the sun. Christians ought always to think long-term and serve in the present (1 Thes 1:9–10). We should view our present historical moment within the ebb and flow of God’s mission in the world (Jn 20:21–22).

Our cultural influence will vary according to the social-religious setting in which we find ourselves. Some social contexts are too messy for positive influence on a grand scale. Sometimes, tragically, there is so little common ground and little notion of common good. (South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and the former Yugoslavia come to mind.)

Sometimes, hostile ideologies inhibit what is possible. The Hebrew exiles in Babylon were granted a degree of self-expression and religious distinctiveness; the early Christians in the Roman Empire were not. Neither was such freedom available to dissidents in Catholic-dominated Europe during the Inquisition, religious minorities in Protestant-ruled states after the Reformation, or Christians in Nazi-controlled countries, the Soviet Empire, Imperial Japan, or North Korea and conservative Islamic states today.

On the other hand, sometimes we unintentionally become the intimidating force at the table. We must remember that our goal should not be to establish a theocracy. We are no longer operating in ‘Christendom’. We do not elect our country’s pastor-in-chief or moral-exemplar-in-charge. We must sometimes support the lesser of two evils and the most viable path to the common good.

God may not have any intention to ‘Christianize’ our nation, but he definitely wishes to revive the church. Certainly, it is a blessing for the church to dwell in a nation that welcomes it, but it is not always good or godly for our nation to reside in the church.

We must be realists, therefore, and permit our entire worldview to mould us so that we are not deluded or deceived. This world is beyond repair. In fact, it is terminally ill. In all cases, our intervention is palliative. Sometimes, we must leave both the wheat and tares in place and ‘let both grow together until the harvest’ (Mt 13:27–30), remaining ‘wise as serpents and innocent as doves’ (Mt 10:16). We must function as the ‘salt of the earth’ (Mk 9:50), serving as a preservative as we await the new heaven and new earth.

IV. The Table as a Basis for Christian Apologetics

As a final note, we should keep in mind, and point out where appropriate, that the very existence of a table where we come together to seek the common good presupposes the truth of the Christian worldview. As I wrote above, ‘Even before we argue or reject, welcome or exclude, wield power or share it, we presuppose many critical social, existential, and *ontological* realities.’

Even though proponents of differing worldviews often deny the existence or relevance of the Christian God or his law conceptually, in practice they cannot live in this way. Their behaviour and convictions betray them, for they presuppose the very conditions that the Bible explains and that their worldviews cannot explain.

Honesty demands recognition of only two options ontologically. We can believe in either impersonal materialism or a personal cosmos, governed by an intelligent, absolute Person. Obviously, everyone who agrees to take a place at the table does not *really* believe in ultimate chaos or meaninglessness. At their deepest level, what the Bible calls the *heart*, they do not hold this anti-biblical worldview. Though they may never acknowledge this truth, their very participation presupposes an underlying order created by God.

In effect, your opponents at the table are relying on borrowed Christian capital. They are unwittingly presupposing theism in order to oppose it. They possess a kind of faith in God, though it is hidden, assumed and unconscious—or perhaps conscious but held in hostility (Rom 1:18–23).

Christians, therefore, can and should participate at the table for the common good of all. But we should never forget the hidden, ontological presuppositions that make the event possible. Moreover, we must never forsake our evangelistic motivation, because every seat at the table is occupied by a creature made in God's image, subject to God's revelation, and benefitting from his common grace that calls them at every moment to repentance (Rom 2:4).