

MY PURPOSE: THESIS STATEMENT

My goal for this series of essays and book reviews is to demonstrate and explain the emotional and intellectual tension within and among many people, especially Christians, as we experience what seems to be storms waging between our growing faith in the current and future reality of the kingdom of God, versus the current and future developments in the world's socio-economic-political environment, which we shall call the kingdom of man.

When I started this series in 2019, **my secondary goal** was to propose a solution to the tensions. At that time I thought that solution could be the church. As these essays unfolded I became painfully aware that conditions in our churches and in our society were such that the church could not be expected to provide the solution or to significantly help to ease the tension.. Nevertheless, as I prepare and present the essays that follow, I will continuously address possible solutions. Furthermore, what I will be emphasizing is that if we participate in the church as Christ intended it to be, and if we also support and engage in other approaches that advance the Kingdom of God, we may find ourselves safe in the storms and we will be relieved of the tensions that many of us now feel and experience.

KINGDOM OF GOD vs. KINGDOM OF MAN.

Before we can proceed, we should define what is meant by the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Man. The ways to distinguish these two spheres of influence can be found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For guidance to clarify these points of difference I will turn to Professor Henry Stob (1908 to 1996), who was a highly-respected and popular professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, where I sojourned for one year starting in August, 1970. In describing Dr. Stob's perspective, we will see his debt to St. Augustine (354 to 430) for differentiating the Kingdom of God from the Kingdom of Man. In a future essay we will also reference Chuck Colson's important book, *Kingdoms in Conflict*.

Key points in understanding the Kingdom of God are seeing and understanding that God's Kingdom is and must be a Christian's first priority, and, secondly, that Christians have every right and responsibility to consider God's Kingdom as our first and top reality. That the Kingdom of God is our first priority comes from our savior and Master, Jesus Christ, in Matthew 6:30, when He instructed us to seek first the Father's kingdom and His righteousness. Furthermore, A. W. Tozer (1897 to 1963) makes the clear case that no one can legitimately deny Christians the right to view the Kingdom of God as their most important reality and sphere of influence. Tozer argues that "Every man must choose his world. If we who follow Christ, with all the facts before us and knowing what we are about, deliberately choose the Kingdom of God as our sphere of interest I see no reason why anyone should object." (1948, p. 37)

JUSTICE

The desire for justice engulfs most people, if not all people. For those of us who see our first allegiance to the Kingdom of God, we see God's call for justice in both the Old and New Testament. Our savior and model in the Kingdom of God—Jesus Christ—clearly called us to

live a life pursuing justice. For all those who are somehow affiliated with the United States of America (USA)—as citizens, long-term residents, visitors, or new arrivals—we also are introduced to the vital concept of justice as part of our participation in the kingdom of man. Our nation’s most important document, the Constitution, states in the first paragraph that the people’s purpose was to “establish justice” as one of our six objectives in writing and endorsing our constitution in 1787.

A major source of tension that we are now experiencing is that there is no agreement as to what constitutes justice. There is disagreement among Christians within the Kingdom of God and disagreement within our nation. Therefore, we will examine how each side in each sphere of influence defines and advocates for its particular position on the definition of justice.

THE COMMON GOOD

We shall also see that related to the concept of justice is the idea of the common good. The concept of the common good does not seem to be a major topic within the Kingdom of God and its defining document.. The reason is that the defining document for the Kingdom of God, the Scriptures, has a focus on God’s call for justice, love and morality. With such an emphasis, the outcomes of these priorities will result in the common good. However, what is best for the Kingdom of God and all of its affiliated institutions is to focus on justice, as called for by our Triune God.

Recently writers and thinkers who address key issues within our social-economic-political environment tend to discuss and address the concept of the “common good.” An example is Robert Reich’s recent book, *The Common Good* (2018). I have noticed that there is less discussion recently of what justice calls for and more emphasis on what the writers and commentators consider to be the elements of the common good. Meacham suggests another term for the common good, namely responding to our “better angels” which is a reference to Lincoln’s Inaugural Address. Brill provides a detailed analysis as to the reasons for the breakdown of the common good within the last 50 years.. A summary of Brill’s perspective is evident in the title for his lead article in the May, 2018, issue of *Time* magazine: “My Generation Was Supposed to Level America’s Level Field. Instead We Ripped it for Ourselves.” Nevertheless, Brill also provided some signs of hope for America’s return to the common good.

LOVE

Love is certainly God’s priority. God is love, and love is probably the most talked about imperative in the Kingdom of God as Christians try to live a life of love. In what some call the liberal churches, love is a major defining factor. Furthermore, in society we hear voices and also see actions that are clearly acts of love and compassion. In fact, currently the acts of kindness in the secular world are, to me, signs that lead me to ask myself, why are Bible-focused Christians not leading the efforts in this particular area? On the other hand, within both the world of churches and within the secular world we hear many voices and see actions that are clearly disturbing, hence generating tensions, because they do not promote love and they seem to violate what most reasonable people recognize as decent, civic discourse and behavior. In these writings

we will not create a comprehensive inventory of these kinds of attitudes and behaviors. However, we will stipulate that hate groups, gang violence, abuse of women, domestic violence, and extreme political rhetoric are evidence of speech and behavior which we reject. Furthermore, if today's news reports are not enough to see what is taking place, we will also remind ourselves of the tragic aspects of our nation's history: slavery, racism, the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, the removal of native Americans into Indian reservations, anti-immigrant movements, and legal and de-facto segregation.

VALUES

Values are very much a source of tension within the Kingdom of God as well as within the kingdom of man. A big difference between these two spheres of influence is that within the Christian community, certain values are still recognized and addressed, whereas in the western, secular world most aspects of what once was considered proper is not considered worthy of attention, discussion, or condemnation. There are ethical issues that are sources of tension within the Kingdom of God as well as sources of conflict between the Kingdom of God and kingdom of man. Sexual identity, same sex marriage and the right to an abortion, are examples of these tensions both within the sphere (i.e. the church community broadly defined) and between the spheres, with a major segment of the evangelical church going against the western, secular world. As we move along in these essays and book reviews, we shall notice various characteristics of these tension, which, in some instances, can be all consuming in our minds and emotions.

These conclusions of the secular world impact upon and influence the attitudes, positions, and actions within segments of the Kingdom of God, particularly as these segments are found in the many and various American churches. As we shall see, the ethics of the secular world, as reflected in alternative views of justice and the common good, also affect church members and participants as well. Hence, the tensions continue as we try to survive the storms that ebb and flow as the Kingdom of God intersects with the kingdom of man.

THE CHURCH

All of these tensions play themselves out as the church of Jesus Christ intersects with the kingdom of man. As I understand the church as described in the New Testament, it is Christ's community which is and should be the Christian's highest calling. Each local assembly, small or large, which identifies itself as part of Christ's church, should be engaged in prayer, music, praise, worship, the preaching and study of the Scriptures, mutual support, counseling and guidance, and acts of kindness and compassion.

In our pre-COVID pandemic, a person who stepped into a local assembly should have experienced God's presence and the love that Christ's followers have for each other and for others. Unfortunately, this type of experience is not always the case, particularly if we dig deeper than the surface. First of all, we must recognize that the church is no longer exclusively represented by the local assemblies that gather weekly in its many locations throughout the USA and the world. That was true even before COVID-19. The church is now represented on radio,

TV, the Internet, magazines, newspapers, and direct mail. As a result, the simple mandate from the church's founder, Jesus Christ, in the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 18—20) is no longer self-evident, understood and clearly communicated.

Throughout this series of essays and book reviews we shall see how the secular world has influenced Christ's kingdom in many ways. Some influences can be seen as positive, such as the use of technology and electronics in developing Christian music and distributing and promoting the core Christian message. However, much of it is negative. One example that disturbs me to my very core is the way the political world has identified evangelical Christians as an important voting block. As a result, certain key Christian leaders have been persuaded and convinced that allegiance to the political agenda of a particular party is the only way to secure the fulfillment of their particular objectives. This has resulted in tensions with the Christian church community as well as what is called the cultural war between segments of the church and the secular world. The current outcome, I believe, is that Christ's message from the Bible-believing church is compromised. Furthermore, the tensions within the church are intensified to the point where political dialogue is virtually impossible within a local church or even within a family or a group of friends.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

As we move along in these essays I will compare and contrast the church with the role of government. I will focus on government in general, although I will note the different levels of government—local, state, and national—and also the three branches at each level—executive, legislative, and judicial. When I address government from the view of the Kingdom of God, I will reference the views of Stephen Monsma (1936—2017). In discussing government we will not be able to avoid a discussion of politics, which is certainly today a major cause of the tensions that we have been discussing.

For many years I have admired Dr. Steven Monsma. I have followed his work and writings since the 1970's. He has served as a professor, politician and government administrator in Michigan, and a researcher, and writer. I know him basically through his books and essays, and I have never been in his classes. The highlight of my relationship with him was in the summer of 1992 when I met with him at an ocean-front café in Malibu, CA. I reached out to him for some advice as to my future while he was a professor at Pepperdine University and I was ending nineteen years as the director of community development in Elizabeth, NJ as a result of my Mayor having lost the Democratic Primary Election on June 4, 1992 (my birthday!).

Monsma's *Healing for a Broken World* (2008) has been one of my favorite books. It has become especially dear to me this year when I learned that he had passed away in late 2017, at the age of 80—only eight years older than my current age! Steve Monsma's key message, as I have understood and appropriated it, is that government's purpose is to pursue justice. My understanding of the concept of justice was shaped by Monsma through his description of justice as he believed it to be shaped and informed by the Bible. One of my findings and conclusions with regard to justice is that different groups of people have different understandings of what comprises justice. This is true among Christians, even those who consciously try to formulate

their beliefs on a strict reading of the Bible. I see justice to be providing people “their due” by balancing the principles of meeting people’s needs, treating them with equality, and giving them their “just deserts.” In future essays and book reviews I hope to expand upon this view of justice and to show how Steve Monsma, and others have helped me to shape and inform my definition of justice. I believe that a comprehensive, accurate view of justice as a key goal for government and for society as a whole helps us understand and navigate our way through the complexities of our current times.

For a perspective from the kingdom of man with regard to the concept of justice, I will turn to the work of John Rawls (1921 to 2002), as well as other thinkers and critics who have commented on his major contribution to the field of philosophy and ethics. Rawls saw himself as developing “to a higher level of abstraction the theory of the social contract found in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.” Step by step the *Theory of Justice* develops two principles of justice. These two principles of justice are restated in *Justice as Fairness*, 30 years after they were first introduced, as follows:

1. Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and
2. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (the difference principle). (2001, p. 42)

Looking at these statements now reminds me that the writings of John Rawls are not self-evident. I read, researched, and studied his views for five years as I prepared my doctoral dissertation, which was completed in 2004. I hope to summarize my key findings and observations in these writings, and I plan to show how the positions taken by John Rawls and the counter-positions taken by his critics have influenced greatly the social-economic-political sphere which we see evident in the kingdom of man.

FINAL WORD IN THE INTRODUCTION

We have seen in each major topic summarized above that the dominant views and the counter views in the kingdom of man have impacted the thinking, attitudes and actions in the Kingdom of God, thereby creating the tensions that we have described in this introduction. As we introduce each essay and book review that follows, we shall remind the reader of our purpose in preparing these writings. **Our primary goal** is to demonstrate and explain the emotional and intellectual tension within and among many people as we experience what seems to be storms waging between our growing faith in the current and future reality of the kingdom of God, versus the current and future developments in the world’s socio-economic-political environment, which we shall call the kingdom of man. Our **secondary goal** is to explore possible solution to the current tensions which we believe will not be alleviated any time soon on this side of eternity.

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