

Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in the Light of Scripture

Wayne Grudem

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, 619 pp., £25.99, hb,
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RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage consacré à l'enseignement de la Bible sur la politique commence par l'exposé de principes bibliques sur les gouvernements en les replaçant dans le cadre plus large de la vision du monde biblique. On doit regretter le trop peu d'attention portée au contexte dans lequel s'insèrent les textes bibliques. L'herméneutique mise en œuvre n'est pas toujours conséquente : tantôt, Grudem insiste sur le fait qu'il est légitime qu'un gouvernement agisse de manière différente des individus en vertu du mandat spécifique qu'il a reçu de Dieu (42, 79-82, 189-191), tantôt il ignore cette distinction pour dénoncer comme une forme de vol la taxation en vue d'une redistribution de richesse (281). Il en résulte qu'aux yeux des Européens, le livre apparaît comme une lecture sélective des textes bibliques sur lesquels s'appuient les chrétiens républicains des États-Unis. Malheureusement, Grudem n'a pas su porter un regard suffisamment critique sur les valeurs de sa culture à la lumière de l'enseignement biblique sur la priorité des relations humaines, de l'amour, de la justice et de la compassion.

SUMMARY

Grudem's *Politics according to the Bible* begins promisingly by identifying some biblical principles concerning government and placing those within a broader biblical worldview. However, he does not spend enough time engaging with the contexts of the biblical material. Grudem fails to deploy a consistent hermeneutic, at times insisting that government can act differently from individuals because it has a specific mandate from God whilst at other times ignoring this distinction to denounce the redistribution of wealth through taxation as theft (281). The result is a book which identifies for European Christians the selective readings from the Bible on which Republican Christians in America rely. Sadly, Grudem has not allowed the biblical perspective on the priorities of relationships, love, justice and mercy to result in a radical critique of the values of his culture.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Grudems *Politik nach der Bibel* beginnt vielversprechend: Das Buch macht einige biblische Prinzipien zu politischer Regierung aus und betrachtet diese auf dem Hintergrund eines breit gefächerten biblischen Weltbildes. Jedoch nimmt sich Grudem nicht ausreichend Zeit, sich mit dem Kontext des biblischen Materials auseinanderzusetzen. Auch versäumt er es, seiner Hermeneutik treu zu bleiben, denn einige Male behauptet er, dass eine Regierung anders als Einzelpersonen handeln kann, weil sie einen besonderen Auftrag von Gott hat (42, 79-82, 189-191), während

er andere Male diese Unterscheidung ignoriert, um eine Umverteilung von Reichtum durch Steuern als Diebstahl anzuprangern (281). Das Ergebnis ist ein Buch, das europäischen Christen diejenige Bibelstellen aufzeigt, auf die sich republikanische Christen in Amerika beziehen. Leider hat Grudem nicht zugelassen, dass eine biblische Perspektive zu vorrangigen Werten wie Beziehungen, Liebe, Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit zu einer radikalen Kritik der Werte seiner Kultur führt.

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Wayne Grudem is an American systematic theologian who has written this book to demonstrate, in a systematic fashion, how teachings from the Bible can be deployed to support the positions of the Religious Right in the USA in the culture wars of this generation. He is to be commended for his commitment to the relevance of the Bible to contemporary political questions. There is much useful material in the opening four chapters. Grudem rejects the ideas that all government is evil and demonic or that Christians should focus solely on evangelism or politics to the exclusion of the other (chapter 1). Grudem rejects theonomy for its failure to understand Israel's unique calling in the time of the Old Testament and stresses that Christians should vote for policies and not just for candidates who are Christians (chapter 2). He identifies helpful biblical principles concerning government and puts those within the context of a broader biblical worldview (chapter 3).

However, there are a number of respects in which Grudem is open to serious criticism. I put to one side his use of statistics. That is, as he says, merely a matter of establishing the facts. Four other factors are of greater concern. First, because Grudem's concern is so directly with contemporary political questions, he does not spend enough time engaging with the context of the biblical material which he cites. In this respect his book compares unfavourably with Jonathan Burnside's *God, Justice and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Whilst Burnside spends pages seeking to understand the biblical mindset, Grudem's tendency is to quote isolated verses, which leaves him vulnerable to the charge of proof-texting. More fundamentally, he remains trapped within contemporary thought patterns. Grudem is an individualist who has not become attuned to the relational mode of thinking which pervades the biblical mindset. For example, with regard to the issue of property, he assumes that the options are that the government owns property or that property is owned by individuals (262). He does not consider the idea of property as *patrimoine*, a shared heritage belonging to a family, which is surely what the narratives about the division of the land and the Jubilee legislation are about.

Secondly, with regards to the issue of climate change, Grudem is a sceptic. The main driver for his scepticism is a theological claim that God would not have 'designed the world to be this fragile in response to human activity' (367). At this point he sounds like Leibniz whose

claim that this was the best of all possible worlds Voltaire regarded as evidently falsified by the Lisbon earthquake. The possibility of environmental catastrophe in a nuclear war or accident presents a similar magnitude of challenge to Grudem's claim.

Elsewhere, it is the issue of freedom on which Grudem majors (91-93). Political moves of which he approves are described as punishing evil and rewarding good (274-275) and endorsed as the collective decisions of the majority of a nation expressed through their elected representatives (343, 395). Those of which he disapproves are measured in terms of loss of freedom (267-268, 285-286). He views political questions too much through the American national commitment to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' rather than the biblical commitment to love one's neighbour.

Thirdly, Grudem does not deploy a consistent hermeneutic. His defence against left-wing and pacifist readings of the Bible is that the biblical love command applies to interpersonal relationships whilst governmental authority bears the sword and has a mandate to carry out God's wrath on wrongdoers (42, 79-82, 189-191). Different principles apply to individuals and to governments. However, when he wishes to denounce the use of taxation to redistribute wealth he equates taxation by government with stealing by an individual (281).

Finally, in this book Grudem rarely engages with other biblical commentators on the verses and themes which he discusses, other than his opponents on the other side of the American political spectrum. The Church Fathers had far more radical things to say about poverty and economics than any contemporary American democrats.

Grudem's book identifies for European Christians the selective readings from the Bible upon which Republican Christians in America rely in support of their positions. However, Grudem has not allowed the biblical perspective on the priorities of relationships, love, justice and mercy to result in a radical critique of the values of his culture and as a result has merely found support in the Bible for positions he had already decided to adopt. A *Politics according to the Bible* worthy of the name would be considerably longer and more nuanced than the 619 pages to which Grudem's book runs.

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God and Being: an Enquiry

George Pattison

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SUMMARY

George Pattison's *God and Being* is an attempt to 'raise anew the question of the meaning of Being' in light of the recent critiques directed towards the standard descriptions of ontology which have gone before within the Christian theological tradition. The book is divided into two parts: three primary chapters setting the terms of the discussion and offering a form of conclusion, between which are sandwiched four chapters exploring the various dimensions of the problem posed by the question of the meaning of Being in the contemporary intellectual milieu. Pattison emphasises the soteriological trajectory of Being, which allows him to introduce the subjective element of questions of ontology. However, this engenders discussion concerning the distance between the subjective self and the presencing of Being within the finite sphere. The central chapters explore issues of temporality, spaciality, language, relations to others, selfhood and embodiment as the different 'dimensions' through which the subjective relationship to Being might be examined. In the concluding section, Pattison offers accounts of possibility, nothingness and language of the gift as fruitful concepts to introduce a subjunctive mood into theological language concerning God and Being.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

George Pattisons *God and Being* [Gott und Sein] stellt einen Versuch dar, 'aufs neue die Frage nach der Bedeutung von Sein' im Licht kürzlich erschienener Kritiken aufzuwerfen, die gegen Standardbeschreibungen von Ontologie vergangener christlicher theologischer Tradition gerichtet sind. Das Werk teilt sich in zwei Bereiche auf: drei Eingangskapitel, welche die Linie der Diskussion vorgeben, und eine Art Schlussfolgerung; dazwischen erörtern vier Kapitel die unterschiedlichen Dimensionen des Problems, das sich durch die Frage nach der Bedeutung von Sein im gegenwärtigen intellektuellen Umfeld ergibt. Pattison betont die soteriologische Ausrichtung von Sein, was ihm ermöglicht, das subjektive Moment der Fragestellung nach Ontologie einzuführen. Dies jedoch stiftet eine Debatte an über die Distanz zwischen dem subjektiven Selbst und der Nahbarkeit von Sein innerhalb des endlichen Bereichs. Die zentralen Kapitel befassen sich mit Themen wie Zeitlichkeit, Räumlichkeit, Sprache, Beziehungen zu anderen, Selbst und Körperlichkeit als unterschiedliche 'Dimensionen', durch welche die persönliche Beziehung zum Sein erforscht werden kann. Im abschließenden Teil berichtet Pattison über Möglichkeit, Nichtigkeit und die Sprache des Geschenkes als fruchtbare Konzepte mit dem Ziel, eine subjektive Atmosphäre innerhalb der theologischen Sprache über Gott und Sein zu schaffen.

RÉSUMÉ