

BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

AFTER NOAH

Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World. By David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020. Pp. 400. \$29.99 (paper); \$19.99 (digital). ISBN: 9780310108849.

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FEDERAL THEOLOGY AND POLITICS

The ecumenical constellation of the Christian churches, traditionally traced back to the confrontations of the sixteenth century, owes almost as much to the seventeenth, when the fragments of Western Christendom, seeking to consolidate their positions, employed the rival strands of theological interpretation to justify themselves and their cultural ambitions. “Divinity,” over and above defending papal, episcopal, or synodical structures of church life, took on the task of cultural apologetics, helping to compound those potent national brews of self-satisfaction and suspicion that energized national projects of colonialism, war, science, and economic growth as the early modern age seemed to demand them. It is, then, a point of special ecumenical interest that in *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World*, David VanDrunen identifies his political theology with a tradition defined primarily by the Reformed scholastic dogmatics of the seventeenth century. Conscious of its differences with other strands of Reformed political thought, he is also glad to highlight its affinities with Catholic scholasticism, admiring especially Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of natural law. Yet he is perfectly at home in the inter-traditional discourse of present-day Christian political theology, and he engages eclectically and often discerningly with recent political philosophy and biblical studies. This, along with his unpolemical patience in arguing distinctive positions, invites some focused attention from those who approach political theology from very different angles, and attention in particular to the theological underpinnings of the so-called federal theology.

Talk of “covenant” is one way of expressing the Jewish and Christian understanding of divine creation and providence. God has made a “covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth,” the prophets declared, as well as with Israel (Jeremiah 33:25; unless otherwise noted, I quote throughout from the English Standard Version). The overarching covenantal relation is made concrete in historical events, and the goal of history can be spoken of as a transition from an “old” to a “new” covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–40). These ideas, common to all Christian traditions, were put to special uses in Reformed theology and developed in two divergent ways. In the English-speaking Puritan theology, emphasis fell on inter-human covenants; in the European federal tradition, which the encyclopedias trace to Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), the divine covenants became a means to explore complex social relations providentially sustained to the present day. If the English-speaking line of thought was seminal for political theory, the European one was no less important for sociology. VanDrunen’s use of the European tradition, drawing on the work of Herman Witsius (1636–1708),

was presented at length in an earlier work.¹ Theologians may find that puzzles arising in *Politics after Christendom* receive a more satisfying explanation in the earlier book.

The goal of federal theology was to explain and justify the varieties of moral relation we engage in in the world, “natural” as well as “redeemed,” universal as well as particular. The successive covenants of biblical history are taken to represent layers of social complexity in a world where many things of ultimate and penultimate significance go on at the same time. In VanDrunen’s use of it, which is not remote in this respect from its seventeenth century antecedents, the theory defends the autonomy of the secular realm in the face of a potentially totalizing evangelical proclamation. While the covenants with Abraham and Moses govern the holy people alone, life in the world goes on under the direction of the covenant with Adam, and the “Noachic” covenant governs all political organization and practice.² While the scope of the sanctifying covenants is limited, the scope of the creational and political covenants is universal.

Political order as such, then, has its own “universal” and “protological” authorization in holy scripture, the narrative from the eighth and ninth chapters of Genesis, recounting how Noah and his family emerged from the ark and received the divine promise that human life, stained with practices of animal and human bloodshed, should not again be wiped from the face of the earth. On this event all political forms depend. The reader should certainly take the trouble to revisit that brief passage, if only to set in high relief the remarkably wide range of conclusions VanDrunen draws from it: that no class of people is disqualified from founding a family (183), that all persons within a jurisdiction must have access to courts (184), that each society is bound to “protect diversity among its members [cultural and religious, but not political] to a maximal degree” (181), and that all members of the human race must cultivate tolerance (185). Foundationally, it is the basis for all aspects of judicial practice, which follow from the command of vengeance on the shedding of human blood (185). These derivations, VanDrunen freely admits, are the work of practical reason, not of simple exposition. Even so, they are something of a stretch. To find judicial institutions in Genesis 9, though there is rabbinic precedent for it, requires sharp eyes. What it clearly has in view is the instinctive resentment of bloodshed, imposing on the survivor a solemn obligation of vengeance. From this, to be sure, judicial institutions may arise by way of such intermediate steps as sanctuaries and “cities of refuge.” But the need for vengeance does not as such imply judicial practices, which require, at the very least, the idea of an impartial point of view.

VanDrunen’s personal contribution to the tradition of federal theology is to reconcile it with the idea of natural law. The unfolding sequence of covenants is distilled into a dichotomy of natural and holy communities. Whatever is needed to fill out the meagre provisions of Genesis 9 is drawn from natural law. Conversely, anything implied by natural law can be included among the proper concerns of political order, which therefore becomes quite expansive, and excludes only religion. “Nature” corresponds to what medieval scholastics called “relative natural law” — that is, the demands of human nature face to face with the exigencies of a fallen human race. The provisions of a pre-political Paradisal natural law play no further part, and since with them there disappears original freedom from political constraint, this reworking of the Reformed tradition has less to say about individual natural rights than some other versions. On the other hand, it is certainly no libertarian tract in favor of “small” government.

1 David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014).

2 I take the liberty of conforming to the *Oxford English Dictionary* spelling of “Noachic” whereas VanDrunen follows his local usage, “Noahic.”

The covenant of nature is distinguished as “common,” a term that creates a certain confusion. It is sometimes said to mean the same as “pluralist,” which is a false trail. Nothing is worth labeling “pluralist” unless it embodies some claim for the political rights of error. Error is not VanDrunen’s concern; he is concerned with the sense in which political society is a *universal* feature of human existence. Politics is “common” in that every member of the species *zoon politikon* has always occupied (if we are accommodating enough in our definitions) some place in some political community. But “common” can also mean “not holy,” distinguishing God’s covenant with Israel from that with gentile political societies defined by the absence of moral goals and soteriological horizons. From these two senses of “common” VanDrunen’s exposition often slips into a third: participation in gentile political communities is claimed to be “open to human beings simply as human beings” (88), regardless of racial or tribal identity. While this may be a general expectation in modernity, shaped by the legacy of Christendom, it is hardly attributable to every political society since Noah. The thesis that no ancient society other than Israel ever thought birth relevant to the distinction of citizen from noncitizen would be a very tough one to argue.

There are finally, then, two contrasting types of association, one centered upon holiness, the other on commonness. That distinction has become the *formal* definition of natural law, which is natural precisely by not being governed by revealed goods and redeeming ends. At which point VanDrunen links arms with the mainstream Christian assertion of the doctrine of the two: “two cities,” “two swords,” “two kingdoms,” “two regiments,” and so on, some version of which, deriving ultimately from the New Testament’s characterization of believers as “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11), was common coin to Christian political reflection from the fifth century onward. Whatever discomfort we may feel with VanDrunen’s own coinage in this field, “dual identity,” the principle of dual authority is long and widely established in Christian political understanding. He has radicalized it and lent it a distinctive emphasis. While not taking it to the conclusion that politics should be methodologically atheist, he requires political institutions, having named God, to be deaf to any and every assertion that is made *about* God, a requirement that bulks very large in his conception of how the Noachic covenant should be recognized in modern political societies. “Religious freedom” is a principle that seems to take priority over all other Noachic principles, even, remarkably, that of avenging bloodshed.

But the enjoyment of religious freedom imposes a very considerable religious *unfreedom*. Not only must the political community be deaf to whatever it might overhear the holy communities saying about God; the holy communities are to be dumb when political affairs are spoken of—dumb, that is, in their own proper voice, for the “dual identity” (150) of Christians allows speech about politics in another voice, not properly Christian (179). This paradoxical assumption that Christians may, and sometimes must, speak *other than* as Christians is not one that political theory can settle on its own: it must justify itself before the bar of theological epistemology, and VanDrunen gives us no idea of how it could be defended there. This leaves “political theology” in an odd position: uniquely authorized to tell of a foundational political covenant made by God with Noah, it is then bound, as it were, to debar itself as soon as the effects and implications of that covenant are in question.

A HISTORY OF NATURE?

The covenant of redemption, unlike the covenant of nature, is successively historical. It evolves from one covenant to another as the sequence of events declares the fuller realization of the divine purpose. It therefore forms a historical narrative, a “salvation-history,” and as traditionally

presented in Christian thought, this narrative points the course of universal history to its goal, telling of a gathering of the nations, a world mission of redemption and reconciliation, the coming of a King of kings and Lord of lords. The duality of the two is set against an eschatological horizon, the unified reign of God in Christ. A political theology of the two kingdoms, then, is expected to draw attention to the provisionality of secular order before that horizon, to give the political task more self-awareness in the dawning “light of the nations.” But VanDrunen’s claim for a universal form of political order, minimal and unchanging, given in primeval experience and still evident in its late-modern manifestations, has rather different implications. It is not susceptible either of internal development or of illumination from the unfolding covenant of grace. The political form is historically inert. Historical disclosure belongs to the holy community alone, and no light falls from history upon Noah’s world. Christendom, which thought that political powers might be made answerable to the accomplishment of God in Christ, was a mistake. So politics “after Christendom” turns out to be identical with politics before it. Nothing can come after Noah, because the Noachic covenant simply goes on as it always has done.

This point has been emphasized more sharply as VanDrunen has proceeded. In *Divine Covenants* he seemed to allow a mutual influence between the two basic types of covenant, because there was an “eschatological destiny inherent in the image [of God].”³ That book contains a very good chapter on biblical law, which, in agreement with the patristic approach, saw Mosaic law as a hybrid of prophetic anticipation and natural-law morality. The covenant with Israel “recapitulated Adam’s probation,” making Israel a “world-in-miniature.”⁴ Its natural-law morality was enlarged by reflection on experience and observation drawn from Near Eastern wisdom traditions. VanDrunen contemplated, in fact, a historical evolution of natural morality, produced by the mutual influence of nature and redemption, as the covenant people absorbed international wisdom and its own eschatological ethic “ripple[d] beyond” it to affect (beneficially, we assume) its “broader social relationships.”⁵ Yet even in *Divine Covenants* this moral development was not allowed to touch politics. Natural law had minimal and maximal forms, and the Noachic mandate consisted solely of its *minimal* principles. In *Politics after Christendom*, the chapter on law contains no mention of biblical law whatever, and the idea that Israel had a historical mission of civilizing the nations, clearly suggested by Deuteronomy (4:5–8), is explicitly ruled out (90–91). A history of morality may be possible, but a moral history of politics is impossible. There is, then, no narrative of historical development, whether theological, Marxist, capitalist, or technological, that could modify the basic logic of political life and action.

On this I have taken the opposite view, and when VanDrunen pays me the compliment of criticizing my work, it is to this point that he pays special attention. It might seem that I could rest my case against him on certain very obvious manifestations of historical progress. Political structures, beginning from tribal warrior bands, have evolved into bureaucratic and technological systems; beginning from means entailing constant bloodshed, they have come to be protective of born life; beginning as quasi-monarchical monopolies they have evolved highly diffused forms of democratic consultation and cooperation. But it would be unwise to rely on such appearances. If politics has anything to do with morality and living well, even if only as a protective fence for it, the question can be asked whether its evolution from primitive to complex structures is a *moral* gain, or whether it is in the end all a tale of increased technical control and reproductive success. Moral questions are never answered by simple inspection of facts, not even such very suggestive

3 VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 46.

4 VanDrunen, 354.

5 VanDrunen, 469.

facts as the response of governments worldwide to the recent pandemic. There are always other facts, which suggest other conclusions. And as we behold the uninspiring daily conduct of our political actors, there is a strong appeal in the proverb, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!*

To place the disagreement between us in perspective, let us compare my assertion and his denial of a history of politics with a more radically historicist third position. We sometimes hear it said that politics has neither always existed nor has developed, but has quite simply, and quite recently, been *invented*. Of politics before the French Revolution we can say nothing, because no such thing existed; older sociological forms and ideologies were not related to the defining object of political endeavor, how we may govern ourselves. To such a contention both he and I are likely to reply that it has lost sight of a fundamental truth of history: nothing comes of nothing. No line we care to draw between periods of history can be more than a suggestive interpretation, for we can never escape the continuities connecting any new point of departure with its antecedents. If self-government is what politics is “about,” either it is an idea that has emerged at length over the millennia, or, if it is a new conceptual device of modernity, it has no more claim to be considered important for human existence than modernity itself has. We must choose between a radically modernist politics and one with ontological significance; we cannot have both. If any human phenomenon is claimed to be central to our self-understanding, we must be shown not only its form but the history of its emergence. What is at stake between VanDrunen and me, then, is not whether there *is* a political form or a political history (for politics could not exist as a human phenomenon without both), but the relative weight we assign to form and history in a normative depiction of political order. And I have to ask him why, having endowed the form of politics with an ancient origin, he assigns no weight to the narrative that connects that origin to the present.

That form he identifies with *judicial institutions*, and I am far from disagreeing. (Though I would prefer to dispense with “institutions” and speak simply of “judgment”: wherever human communities establish a public space by acting to distinguish right from wrong, there, in an elementary form, is political action.) If VanDrunen had been content with that one element, his claims about a universal and unchanging form of political life would have seemed less problematic than they do. But having suppressed the history of political evolution, he has to add two further formal stipulations to make his picture correspond to the expectations of the present day: it must involve both “legitimacy” and “accountability.”

These features have been on display, he supposes, since Noah, and even Sodom and Gomorrah must have displayed them. But in fact these two concepts presuppose *the sovereignty of law*, which, as VanDrunen realizes, is not even indirectly hinted at in Genesis 9, and is in fact an idea generated by salvation history. The ancient political society typically regarded its constitutional arrangements as *prior to law*: law demonstrated the successful political activity of a prince, much as accumulated wealth and architectural monuments did. For the thesis that the political body and its institutions *subsist in* the common possession of a law, we must look first to the book of Deuteronomy and then to the promises of blessing on the restored Jerusalem: “I will make your government be peace and righteousness rule over you” (Isaiah 60:17, New English Bible). It was the thesis that was to transform the political understanding of mediaeval and modern Europe, giving rise to the earliest uses of the term “state.”

The heart of VanDrunen’s antihistoricism is expressed in three assertions given prominence in an important passage (117–22), all of which are negative: (1) Christ does not redeem political structures; (2) believers and other morally serious people must not try to transform political structures into the moral pattern of Christ’s kingdom; (3) only the church, and not the city, prevails at the end of time.

To comment briefly on each of these:

The first assertion, that the incarnation left the world as it found it, is a statement any theologian should look around carefully before making. Of course, it can have some uncontroversial and trivial applications. To state that the incarnation left the boiling point of water unchanged is unlikely to give offense either to faith or common sense. But that example simply highlights the difference between the regularities of inanimate nature and those of political order, where historically unique and unforeseeable actions are always a factor. “Natural law” is not a “law of nature,” observing how things regularly happen, but of a norm for the freedom of human action. But if politics is an aspect of human nature, then it is in need of redemption, governed by the patristic claim that Christology embraces every aspect of human nature: what is “not assumed” is “not healed.” It is, in fact, virtually impossible for a Christian theologian who believes in a history of human redemption to maintain the political *plus ça change* to the bitter end. And VanDrunen does not do so. Though God continues to rule political communities “by means of” the Noachic covenant, he tells us, he does so now—that is, since the incarnation—“through” his incarnate and exalted Son. Political authority had its “origin” in Christ as “eternal God and Logos,” but is now “overseen” by Christ as “God-man,” who holds the political structures “especially accountable” for any interference with the church. These concessions might in theory open the way for a return to the thesis of Christendom, that the principalities and powers subdued by Christ must consequently act in subjection to him. But VanDrunen has barred that way of return by insisting that the political powers can know nothing of Christ’s triumph. Apparently, then, a major change in the governance of politics has occurred within the trinitarian life of God, but it has made no impact on how things proceed on earth. The theological appearances are saved, and nothing of political significance has occurred.

In the second assertion, VanDrunen joins the mainstream of Christendom in rejecting a perfectionist political order. Just as there is a secular society as well as a holy one, there is a standard of workable secular justice as well as a standard of moral perfection. Those who until as recently as seventy years ago used to urge the claim of a “Christian political order” understood very well that they were speaking of an imperfectible order, not of the Kingdom of Heaven or even the life of the church. But in VanDrunen’s view such a claim has already yielded to perfectionism, since it has offended against the essentially plural character of Noachic order. This is rather puzzling. An “imperfectible” political order, we might think, was one that conformed to no perfect ideal and guaranteed no purity of practice. To fault its imperfectibility because it falls short of a modern ideal of pluralism is to insist on the *most perfect* of all possible imperfectible worlds! And it is to ignore what I take to be one of the most striking features of our actual political experience, deserving a great deal more thought: its instability. Pluralism is not one and the same thing. From place to place, from moment to moment, the plural lines that define the cultural landscape shift and transform themselves, often under the pressures of big money and loud noise, and what looks like a plurality today looks like a monopoly tomorrow.

The third assertion appears to contradict a well-known one of Karl Barth: “the hope in which the Christian community has its eternal goal, consists . . . not in an eternal church but in the *polis* built by God and coming down from heaven to earth.”⁶ If VanDrunen’s general silence about Barth, who shares his interest in making the most of Reformed scholasticism, is as pointed as it seems, that contradiction may be deliberate. But Barth’s statement is hardly more than a summary of what any reader might learn from the book of Revelation itself, where the very word *church* disappears after the introductory letters and the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem reaches its climax in the

6 Karl Barth, “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-war Writings, 1946–52* (London: Camelot Press, 1954), 19.

words, “I saw no temple in the city” (Revelation 21:22). The disagreement of these two Reformed theologians turns on their different uses of eschatology. For Barth the vision of the end afforded a fruitful positive model for the challenges of our times: the church that knew it would disappear into a polis at the coming of Christ could not avoid addressing the crisis of the polis in 1930s Europe. VanDrunen accepts no models from eschatology, only contrasts. The reason the church and not the polis must prevail at the end of time is that it is *not* the prevailing reality of the present age, and it should not imagine that it is. Why eschatology should be handled only in this negative way, we are not told. We could speculate on a continued influence of anti-post-millennialist resistance to nineteenth-century ideas of progress, but that would be no more than a speculation.

MODERNITY, TRADITION, AND SCRIPTURE

And so the search for a moral tendency or development in political history is refused. Yet, unexpectedly, VanDrunen is prepared to assign a definitely positive value to late-modern liberal society, which he describes as “pretty good,” or “better than most.”⁷ What grounds can he offer for this judgment, made in opposition to a modernity-critical view that he presumes to be shared by Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, and me? Is it essentially a *technical* judgment about the resourcefulness of developed markets and technological capacities? Or does it trade, after all, on the conception that liberalism is the wayward grandchild of Christendom, inheriting (and perhaps squandering) moral attitudes that have made society more sensitive to human needs? Or does it in the end claim merely that modern liberalism is closer to the pagan simplicity of the Noachic mandate in repudiating religious norms? I cannot tell, nor can I tell what such an overall evaluation is supposed to contribute practically. It matters to late-modern Western believers that in discerning the providence and judgment of God, they should find some things to appreciate in their social setting and others to criticize. But it falls to those who would guide their political thought to point out *what* things in that setting most deserve their appreciation and criticism, and *why*. And from this task VanDrunen shies away.

In the chapter that reviews contemporary strategies for Christians coping culturally with late modernity, the advice he ends up offering is that we should “accept[] *the fleetingness of life*” (166), trust in divine providence, and exercise charity towards all. Asked what the church ought to do in the present situation VanDrunen replies: what it *always* ought to do. Which is unexceptionable, of course, except in what it leaves out. Is there no question to be asked and answered about the present moment, no need to interpret the signs of the times, no awareness that our salvation is nearer than when we believed? Being “instant in season [and] out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2, English Revised Version) does not mean being unaware of the changing seasons. Of course, discerning the signs of the times is difficult, and there may often be need to deflate hasty activism and apocalyptic hysteria. The Kingdom of God does not come by “watching” public manifestations and political trends. But to stop at that point is inevitably to lull believers to sleep instead of equipping them for intelligent and sober discernments. The practical task we are given and the promise that accompanies it allow us to hope for effective witness *in our times*. Dare we conclude that history, even our present history, does not interest VanDrunen very much? Despite the role he assigns to me as a cultural pessimist, the point at which I feel most obliged to mark the difference between us is his failure to offer any *hope* to support Christians bearing witness to their political contexts.

Together with that “pretty good” there is a “pretty horrible,” applied generically to the Middle Ages (175). It is offered as a reason (Aquinas notwithstanding) to be skeptical of the “profoundly

⁷ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants*, 513–14.

insightful ‘medieval model’” advocated by Alasdair MacIntyre and Rod Dreher (175).⁸ VanDrunen’s reasons for dispraising the Middle Ages are no more apparent than his reasons for praising modernity. He mentions violence, hygiene, diet, and the paucity of “occupational options,” none of which would normally be thought relevant to evaluating philosophical or theological insight. He also pleads their lack of Bibles and Gospel-preaching churches. But the rejection of the Middle Ages is only the initial charge in a rejection of all premodern Christian practical thought. The Reformation is not exempt; Calvin is bracketed together with Augustine as a “great theologian” who in the matter of religious freedom is simply “embarrassing” (194).

And this goes some way to explain VanDrunen’s title for the book. Although for much of the book it might have been “Politics after Noah” rather than *Politics after Christendom*, his modernism chimes in with those denunciations of “Christendom” that flourished on the left wing of American Christianity a generation ago. They were marked by a passionate repudiation of the collusion of political life with force and a rejection of the liberal settlement, in neither of which VanDrunen follows them; and yet there are striking similarities. He is no more inclined than they were to urge believers to take up tasks of active political responsibility rather than finding the whole meaning of their lives within the sacramental fellowship. He is no less suspicious than they were of everything done by political theology prior to late modernity (though without their reservation in favor of an idealized first three Christian centuries). The difference between them comes to this: where they see liberal late-modernity as still in thrall to the legacy of Christendom, he sees it as having successfully put Christendom behind it. His favored political posture of “liberal conservatism” is described as a meeting of two complementary modernist perspectives, both defined by their rejection of the Christian tradition of political thought.

But we encounter a paradox: the *theological* reasoning of this most anti-traditional of practical reasoners is wholly shaped by a tradition. It is, in fact, precisely the seventeenth-century agenda of theological-cultural apologetics that makes a modernist of him. Cultural apologetics in the twenty first century is inevitably centered on matters constitutive of late modernity, and there are, of course, very good reasons why we are especially concerned at the present moment with pluralism and religious freedom. For the past two decades religious freedom has been violently challenged by nationalized versions of Islam and (to a lesser extent, but forcibly) Buddhism, and in the United States these have elicited copycat forms of Christian nationalism reinforced with a few crude anti-modernist gestures. To such developments, which have given the dogmatics of atheist secularism a new stridency, VanDrunen responds as a theologian should—by looking to trace what is best in our liberal inheritance back to the gifts of God. But here his tradition misdirects him. Instead of pointing him to the historical narrative of God’s gracious dealings with the world, to the history of Israel, Christ, and the church and its impact on human societies, it prompts him to produce a primeval myth of the divine foundation of the secular state. Such a myth, which can only assure us that we live in the most perfect of all possible imperfectible worlds and can give us no insight into the moral priorities and tasks of living where and when we do, merely inhibits the intelligent reading of Scripture.

In *Divine Covenants* VanDrunen professed the wise hermeneutic principle that scripture is its own best interpreter, and showed himself adept at carefully researched and often perceptive exegesis of biblical passages. But if scripture is to interpret scripture in political theology, it must be read whole, not sifted through a tradition that restricts consideration to Genesis 9. We are entitled to be

8 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

troubled, then, by the large expanses of scripture that make no appearance in *Politics after Christendom*, or that appear only to be set aside. The book of Deuteronomy, an articulate treatise on the role of law in political life, is hardly noticed; the book of Revelation, with its critique of the military, economic, and ideological propagation of empire, is dismissed in a comment about metaphor (120). The prophets, with much to say about national and international righteousness, having made a constructive appearance in *Divine Covenants*, disappear here. The Gospels, with their teachings of the Kingdom of Heaven and their accounts of Jesus's trial and death, are similarly absent. The sieve of federalist tradition has proved remarkably efficient in eliminating whatever does not "authorize" existing social forms. No greater narrative ties the meaning of Noah to the meaning of Abraham and Christ. It is not that VanDrunen questions the narrative and historical ambitions of the scriptural texts, but the meanings he is prepared to draw from them are not narrative or historical meanings. Authorizing this institution and defining that one is the limit of what he will allow the scriptures to contribute to the political enterprise.

The medieval theologians, for all their lack of printed bibles and poor hygiene, made more effective use of more scripture in their political theology than David VanDrunen does. Searching the text for light to fall on their own political life, their interpretation was sometimes carried away by the sheer facticity of the structures of papal or imperial power. Sometimes it seized on inappropriate comparisons, failed to allow for the differences of the times, universalized occasional provisions, or mistook rhetorical flourishes for conceptual markers, all of them mistakes to which any hermeneutic enterprise is exposed, especially one associated with urgent practical tasks. But these mistakes were the mistakes of bold and comprehensive Bible-readers, and the negotiations and struggles by which the authority of scripture was asserted in the medieval world were often crowned with success. What they offer us are examples, warnings, and an inspiration to our imaginations to discern in the same texts the very different challenges and opportunities of our times. If we will not learn from them, what theological discernments shall we be in a position to make? What witness to the works of God shall we leave to generations who will come not only after Noah, after Abraham, after Christ, and after Christendom, but after us?

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