

Another Country: A Pre-Political, Political Provocation

Preface

The title of this essay deserves a brief explanation. It is a provocation because it is not a detached or academic reflection. It is written in a sermonic tone. It is intentionally biting at points. It does not go out of its way to seek balance, for it is seeking to redress a radically unbalanced situation. In addition, it has as its target audience a traditionally protected class, namely, conservative American evangelicals. It's not that the material does not apply equally to progressives or other political persuasions, it does. It's simply that I write primarily to those who swim in the same ecclesiastical ecosystem that I do. It is political because broadly speaking the political, the polis, is inescapable. Also, it does address at some length the church's social engagement with the world. Finally, it is pre-political because I am not interested in policy prescriptions or weighing various tactical and strategic approaches to the culture. While I do sketch something of the church's engagement with the world, this is a preliminary word. The argument here is that something serious is amiss and that addressing that disorder is the first business of the day for any political theology. The essay breaks into two parts. First, under seven headings, I describe the missing reality, and then, secondly, under five headings, I seek to show what it might look like to take such a reality seriously in our public lives.

Introduction

When my oldest daughter was a teenager, I had a little schtick I went through with her before she went out. I would say I wanted her to behave as if there was a little tiny version of me, a little invisible man, perched on her shoulder. "Don't do anything the little man wouldn't approve of because the little man will report to me when you get home." To this day, we occasionally joke about the little man on the shoulder.

Now, suppose we had a little invisible man on our shoulders, watching us for, let's say, the last week or month or year or even years. My contention, which I think is beyond dispute, it is too plain or obvious even to argue, is that this

invisible man (hereafter IM) would have no idea that, in addition to America, we have another country. If you asked the IM: What country, what nation, do these Christians belong to? He would reply invariably, virtually without exception, “America.” Any *other* nations? you ask the IM. He looks puzzled. “No, no, they are mono-nationalists. They have one and only one country.”

His unbiased report would go something like this: “America is their country. It’s the only country they ever talk about. With many, it is almost all they talk about. America. American politics. American culture. Ad Nauseum. Now they are Christians, but their country is America. Their homeland is America. They never mention any other homeland or country as having any bearing on their convictions. Their speech about the kingdom of God and the state of America seem to be correlated. It is exquisitely difficult to disentangle the two.

Their gospel is about transforming and restoring America, and the state of American culture is a barometer for the state of the church, and certainly for the task before the church. Their conversation contains much in the form of ‘if only the church would do X, we would see Y result in the culture.’ There is an immediate conjunction between their Christianity and America. They are adjacent. They play on the same linear, historical plane. In them, patriotism and piety have kissed. Of course, they consider themselves to be Christians first and Americans second, but in practice it is hard to tell which identity is driving the other one.”

“In fact,” our IM continues, “what they really get angry about, what stirs their passions the most, what the overwhelming number of words they speak are about, and what they expend the most mental energy on, is the American culture wars. It will not be Colossians, or the Trinity, or the Ascension, or the Eschaton, or, heaven forbid, the Beatitudes, which fires them up. Nor will it be the fractured state of the global body of Christ. Oh no. It will be the border, the Democrats, Pelosi, Trump, the gays, the transgender movement, the 2nd Amendment, the Flag. This is where all the fire and passion lie. Touch one of these things and watch the reaction. I’m just reporting. I’m not judging the rightness or wrongness of their positions. After all, I’m just an imaginary

objective invisible man.” That, in some fashion, is what he would report. Of course, if asked, we would check the appropriate heaven-related boxes. No one confesses to confusing America and the kingdom of God. Yet, the tragedy remains. No objective outsider would recognize us as actually possessing or belonging to another country.

This reality on the right, which has made itself visible through the Trump and the Pandemic years, reflects, at best, a grievous disorder, a grotesque lack of proportion in the conservative church. At worst, it is outright idolatry. And that holds even if it happens to land on the right side of some (or even all) of the issues. It is possible to be right and still be disordered in the manner in which you hold your convictions. We can tease this out further by putting the question this way: In recent years would you say the great end of the church, her chief passion, is the worship of the Triune God, especially face to face in the beatific vision, or, have God and his gospel become instrumentalized – a means to the true end at which we are perpetually aiming, namely, the healing of American culture?

Are we, as Geerhardus Vos wrote a century ago, in a situation where “God’s name and prestige are needed in a cause which ultimately transcends him.” I think the answer to this is obvious, yet this great inversion of the end (God himself) for provisional historical means (American reform) is largely hidden from us as we swim in its ubiquitous presence. Often one will hear a litany of all our cultural woes which ends with something like “and this is why we need the gospel.” It’s a telling verbal tic. It betrays a comfortably fitting inversion of means and end. A sublimating of the gospel to temporal and transient ends. The gospel, it turns out, was not given to save us from the Democrats, or from Trump, or from cultural marginalization, or from political powerlessness, or from persecution. It was given to deliver us from the wrath which is to come (1 Thess. 1:10) and to save us from the curse of God’s law (Gal. 3:13). We are not to fear cultural opponents, even if they can kill the body, rather we are to fear the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28).

This inversion of means and ends can take place in many forms. God and any particular noble cause, call it “God and X,” are susceptible to the dynamic. In our case X is America or Christian political engagement with America. Over time X becomes big, God becomes small and shrinks into the background. Eventually you can’t tell which exists for the sake of the other. Usually the means (the culture) subordinate and supplant the end (the Triune Glory). The earthly consumes the heavenly. Not only is there no other country, God himself fades into a kind of background worldview dispenser. Vos said, in the same context of his remark above, that it is possible even to worship one’s own religion. We have a lot of lovers of Christianity, after all it possesses culture transforming power. Christianity can solve this and Christianity can fix that, and Christianity has the resources to address that other thing. We have fewer lovers of Christ or the Triune being. Christianity fires us up. Christology? Not so much.

With that as the diagnosis, at the outset, we must say that believers do in fact, objectively, have another country. Indeed, the church itself is God’s chosen race, his royal priesthood, his holy *nation* (1 Pt. 2:9). The church is the borderless, multicultural, multilingual, global nation of God. She is the only nation with which he has entered into the redemptive glories of the new covenant. She is the only *holy* nation (1 Pt. 2:9) in this age. All the other nations are under the temporary and provisional Noahic covenant alone. In fact, the absence of this distinction between cult and culture, between the church as the redemptive realm of the Spirit’s sanctifying work, and the non-holy but good common grace civil order under the Noahic covenant, is at the heart of the problem. Where it is absent the church’s unique holy *and* national character tends to be obscured. The result is usually an indiscriminate sacralizing of everything. The church makes, or is called to make, all realms holy. The result is a doubling down on sacralizing this current American order as our only country. We need to restore the unique and distinct holiness of the church vis-a-vis the common grace civil order which, nevertheless, retains its own integrity.

Yet, we cannot merely collapse the church in her visible, historical pilgrimage with what we are calling “another country.” As we will see shortly, this other country is the heavenly city which descends at the end of the age when Christ returns (Rev. 21:1-2,10). It is essentially the new creation (Rev. 22:1-5). Put differently, what we are calling “another country” is the heavenly and eschatological reality that the church (in its elect members) partakes of invisibly, by faith, in the Spirit. It is the church in the inner, heavenly mystery of her life, not in her outer estate (Rev. 11:1-3).

The church, in her outward ordered life is a visible sign of, a pointer to, the other country, but is not yet, in this overlap of the ages, the coming city *simpliciter*. After all, Hebrews 12:22-24 tells us that the church has *come to* these realities (Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the spirits of the just made perfect, the angelic hosts in festal gathering). She is not *identical with* these realities. She participates in the new creation by faith, in her inner being (2 Cor. 4:16), but she is not the arrival of the new creation full stop.

Yet, in her outward ministerial labors, labors which in fact take place in Christ and thus in the heavenly tabernacle, she is, or should be, a tangible earthly pointer to this other country. Yet this reality, this participatory pointing, seems virtually absent from her consciousness, or at least deeply obscured. The colony of heaven seems to have been colonized by the earth. The church too has a country, and it is America.

- I. The Missing Country
 - A. The Heavenly City

Let’s describe the missing reality more fully. Its outlines appear in Hebrews 11:
⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

The tent is the symbol of Abraham's sojourner status, even in the promised land. He's a sojourner, an alien in the land of promise, because he knows that the land is typological of the coming new creation. The land points forward to the city which has foundations (plural), whose architect and builder is God. We are told that Abraham was looking for *that* city. And that city, as we have said, is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God. It is the city John sees, having been carried in the Spirit to a great high mountain. It is the city ablaze with the glory of God, whose walls have twelve foundations (plural) with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb on them (Rev. 21:10-15).

This is the city which descends after the final, "Great White Throne" judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). This is the city which, if it is not co-terminus with the new creation, is surely the epicenter of the new creation. This is the city, the polis, to which Abraham looked. Abraham's faith was eschatological all the way down. He was looking to the resurrection and the glory of the life to come. He believes in the God who raises the dead (Rom. 4:17), and the mere existence of his covenant relation with the Lord entailed a faith ordered to the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:22-33).

In fact, not only did Abraham have such faith, Hebrews 11:13 tells us: These all died in faith, not having received the things promised (they may have received typological blessings, but they did not receive the realities foreshadowed by the OT types) but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. Notice the OT saints are described as seeing the promises and greeting them from afar. A central reason we are given the Spirit, Paul says in Ephesians 1:18, is to enlighten the eyes of our hearts (to grant them Spirit-wrought sight) to know the hope of our calling. A hope perpetually, if not exclusively, described in Scripture as eschatological in nature.

So let us ask: Do we see, with the interior eyes of our hearts, the eschatological glory promised to the saints and now revealed in Christ? Does the IM say we are seers, visionaries, people whose spiritual perception

penetrates beyond the veil of sense, beyond the passing, temporal visible things (2 Cor. 4:16-18), to the eternal and glorious realities of the coming city? The OT saints saw those things (in and under and through the OT ordinances and sacrifices and promises) and they greeted them. They greeted the eschatological realities by faith. Like Moses overlooking Canaan, they hailed them with delight. All we seem to see is America. All we hail is a future, restored America. Even the OT saints were not so constrained and bent downward in their vision.

B. The Heavenly Homeland

Hebrews 11 continues: Verse 14: For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. There it is. It was called a city before; here it is called a homeland. They did not already have a homeland. They were seeking one. This not only confirms their status as sojourners and exiles; it tells you that they had and were seeking *another* country. To put this in traditional language which we should use without embarrassment: Heaven is our homeland. Now, there has been a reaction against this sort of talk in some circles as too otherworldly or ephemeral or wispy, or as overlooking the fact that our inheritance is the new heavens and the new *earth*.

Let's address this. Heaven is our homeland. Why? Because the NT speaks that way about it and so should we – without shame. For example, Colossians 1:5 says that in the word of truth, the gospel, we hear of the hope laid up for us in heaven. One of the great needs of the church is for a recovery of a thick and rich conception of heaven. C.S. Lewis has a well-known scene in *The Great Divorce* where the grass in heaven hurts your feet when you step on it. Lewis' point is that heaven is more concrete, more real if you will, than earth. It is the realm of everlasting security and stability and light. This world is the realm of shadows.

Heaven is a created place, (Gen 1:1, Neh. 9:6, Isa. 6:1-6; 66:1) a realm currently veiled from sight. It is the sanctuary-throne of the Most High God, filled with his glory, with throngs of burning angelic hosts, with the spirits of the just made perfect, all engaging in the unending worship of the majesty of the

Triune God (Heb.12:22-24, Rev. 4-5). Heaven is the primordial place of God's glory, and all the earthly places of worship (Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple) are downward shadows or reflections of the heavenly pattern. Indeed, at the coming of Jesus, when the veil between heaven and earth is torn, and the glory of heaven "heavenizes" the current (first) heavens and earth, the whole cosmos, the entire new creation, will become a temple filled with the glory of God (Rev. 21-22). Heaven is the epicenter of the coming new heavens and new earth. We must recapture thinking of heaven as a created realm, a glory-land, a country, our homeland, for that is exactly how Holy Scripture thinks of it.

C. Heavenly Citizenship

The missing country is the eschatological city that has foundations, our heavenly homeland. Taking the concrete national character of this realm with utmost realism, Paul says in Phil. 3:20, that our citizenship (he uses a word that is related to our word "politics") is in heaven. Citizenship is a thick concept. Paul is not nodding in some sentimental way to the fact that we will all go to heaven someday. Some translations render the text: our *commonwealth* is in heaven. In Ephesians 2, after situating the church as raised up and seated with Christ in heaven (2:6), Paul speaks of the church, which was alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, as now, in Christ, being fellow-citizens with the saints (2:11-19). Heaven is a commonwealth, a city, a homeland, and homelands have citizens with the attendant duties, rights and privileges. To the church in Philippi, a proud Roman colony with all the legal benefits that entails, Paul writes reminding them of where their citizenship lies.

We often hear of Christians having dual citizenship. An earthly and a heavenly citizenship. Usually when this topic is addressed, the author will go on to say we have to do justice to both citizenships. After that, what usually happens, is that all the energy, all the remaining content, is about the duties we have as citizens of our earthly countries. The heavenly citizenship vaporizes. This itself is yet another sign of our disorder. We nod to the heavenly citizenship, and then fill libraries with books on Christian political theory which either ignore it,

or background it, or allude to it in passing, to get to the real substance of Christian political engagement – our earthly citizenship and its concomitant duties. America always wins as the real country. The IM has no idea we have a second, radically more important, citizenship.

It's a pathology, which refuses to hear the radicalism in Paul. He does not tell the Philippians (or any church for that matter) that they have the duty of carefully balancing two citizenships. He knows they have some legal benefits in, and duties to, the Empire. But he tells them where their true homeland and citizenship are located. He radically subordinates and relativizes their earthly loyalties to their heavenly home. They are not correlative realities. He does not envision two citizenships, coordinated on the same order of existence, where one edges out the other (at least in theory). Rather, Paul has *another* country, and thus *another* citizenship.

D. Heavenly Mindedness

Heaven is our city, our homeland, our country, the place where our citizenship is, because heaven is where Jesus is, seated at the right hand of God.

Colossians 3:1-4 puts it this way: If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Jesus is in heaven, in bodily glory. And we too have died and been raised with Christ. We have been seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). Every blessing, every last one we have, we have in Christ, in the heavenly places. (Eph 1:3). This attachment, this orientation we are to have toward heaven, is not some oddity, something lying on the fringe of Christian life. It is inscribed into our union with Christ in his death and resurrection, a union sealed to us in baptism. The Christian life is heavenly in orientation from the beginning, at every point, and all the way down. Thus, the text says, we seek the things above, where Christ is. How could it be other than that? Christ is in heaven and we are seeking him. Here we might ask how this seeking of things above is

compatible with all the earthly power grasping, the unending seeking of things below, even “Christian” things below? We not only seek the things above, Paul proceeds to say, we set our minds on the things above. Our minds are to be fixed on, riveted to, the things above.

Of course, they are also to be fixed on Christianizing things below. Wait. I’m sorry, that’s not what the text says. We are to set our minds on things above, and *not* on things that are on earth. There is no “also.” Nearly all that the politicized conservative church does is talk about things below. Jesus said our treasure is to be laid up in heaven and *not* on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). Someone needs to give him the dual citizenship talk because he does not believe we can have treasure in both places. And wherever our treasure is, there will be our hearts. And it is beyond doubt that our hearts are on earth. Anyone watching, like the IM, knows where our treasure lies. One can learn Biblical principles, cultivate a Christian worldview, and seek to apply such knowledge to the culture, all the while living an utterly earthly, horizontal life in continual disobedience to the heavenly-mindedness demanded by the Colossians 3 text – and by the express command of Jesus.

One final point to mine from the Colossians 3 passage. Having died entails mortification, death to the world, death to, and deliverance out of, the horizontal order of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4, 2:20, 6:14). Our life now, resurrection life in union with the resurrected Christ, is *hidden* with Christ in God (3:3). Now is not the time of its full public manifestation. Heaven is our homeland, our city, the place of our citizenship, because it is where we already live. Our life – its inner mystery, its substance, its location – is hidden in Christ who is in heaven and who is our life (3:3-4). In Revelation, the church is designated simply as “those who dwell in heaven” (12:12; 13:6). Does the IM know this?

E. Heavenly Assembly

That heaven is the location of our life in and with Jesus is gloriously depicted in Hebrews 12:22-24 where, in contrast to earthly Mt. Sinai, we are told: But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly

Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

A few comments are in order. First, the author says this is a place to which we have already come. He doesn't say we've come in principle or we've come in hope. We have, by faith, in the Spirit, in our inner being, been lifted up into this scene. This is how the author describes "the already" dimension of our salvation. What Paul describes as being seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6) or being raised with Christ and having our lives hidden with him in God (Col. 3:1-4), is here described with a wider angle of vision as including all the occupants of the heavenly terrain. This place is Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is our country. It is the heavenly sanctuary-throne of God, the place of worship for the global church, catholic in space and time. This is the place to which we are lifted up on the Lord's Day for worship. Laying aside other considerations, this reality alone makes the displaying of the American flag in the place of public worship profoundly unfitting.

The writer delineates the inhabitants of the realm to which we have come. There are innumerable angels in festal gathering. Bright and burning beings, too many to count, devoted to the unending worship of the Triune glory (Rev. 5:11). "Downward bend their burning eyes at Mystery so bright." We have come as well "to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect." The totality of the church, all those written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 13:8, 17:8, 20:12), including the OT saints, is gathered before God, the judge of all. This designation does two things. It places God at the radiating center of heavenly glory, as the chief object of the assembly. God is the same unchanging God, the same consuming fire (v.29), who descended on Sinai. In addition, it highlights the eschatological nature of the gathering. God is the

Judge of all. And our ascent to him in Christ means the Judge is at the door (Jas. 4:9), for the end of all things is at hand (1 Pt. 4:6).

Finally we have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” This is how we can appear in this fiery company. Jesus has shed his blood, bearing our judgment, to establish us in the new and everlasting covenant. This blood he perpetually presents, in this very realm, in the most holy place (Heb. 9:11-12, 23-24), appearing in the presence of God on our behalf. It turns out that there are quite a few “things above” (Col. 3:2) for citizens of the heavenly city to dwell on. There is God, the Judge of all. Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and his saving blood. There are innumerable angels in festal array. There are all the saints, residents of this homeland, living and dead, gathered as the people of God for worship.

One last remark. While this text is used, rightly, to remind the church that it is this assembly into which she is lifted in public worship, the text cannot be constrained to public worship contexts. We do not somehow tumble out of this place once we leave church. We have come to these realities. This is a permanent, abiding glory of the new covenant. The implications of this are, among other things, that this is a text for the whole of Christian existence. This luminous company is what we are to see, by faith, enveloping us. For it is where the polis that is our commonwealth gathers, worships, *and lives*.

And if this is a text for the Christian life, then it is a text for political theology. While we can’t presume to know all the political ramifications of this passage, one thing is certain. This is the only place that will remain after the God who shook the earth from Sinai, shakes the heavens and the earth from his heavenly Zion, removing all created things and ushering in his unshakeable kingdom, a kingdom seen in its currently veiled glory in this very text (Heb. 12:25-29). In the end, the heavenly country is all there is.

F. Heavenly Inheritance

We can call our baptismal death and resurrection (referred to in Col. 3:1-4), along with our consequent ascension in Christ up into heaven (or as Hebrews puts it, into the heavenly sanctuary where Christ himself has entered as our forerunner (6:20, 8:1, 10:19-22)) *verticality*. This verticality is powerfully present in the opening verses of First Peter. It is a text which shows verticality as intrinsic and pervasive. Intrinsic because it is entailed in Christian conversion. Pervasive because it holds across the totality of Christian life.

By God's great mercy, we have been, Peter asserts, born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us (1:3-4). We might say that Christian rebirth has as its efficient cause the resurrection of Christ. We are born into a living hope. This hope is our birthright, and there is not an instant of our existence in Christ without this living hope. And this hope is clearly heavenly. It has nothing to do with the political fortunes of our earthly countries. Christians from totalitarian dictatorships and Christians from democratic republics are born into the same living resurrection hope.

The hope is, v.4 indicates, identical with our inheritance (a land concept under the typological theocracy in the OT) which is kept or reserved in heaven for us. Three things are asserted about this inheritance. First, unlike America, or any earthly city, this inheritance (of which the Spirit is the pledge (Eph. 1:13-14, 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5)), is imperishable (both the Roman Empire and Christendom have perished). That is, not only has it not perished, it *cannot* perish, for it is fundamentally unlike the sub-eschatological, provisional, reversible fortunes of earthly nations. Second, this inheritance is undefiled. It is unstained with sin of any kind. It partakes of the radiant purity of God himself. This can be said of no earthly inheritance. Finally, it is unfading. It neither waxes nor wanes, it does not ebb or flow, it is full in its undimmed and undimable glory. From the moment of our being born again, begotten out of death through the resurrection of Christ, we are oriented toward this living hope, this heavenly inheritance.

Yet, a sense of this verticality is missing among us. It is the elephant that is not in the room. It's absence screams from all our podcasts, our treatises on culture and government, and all our cultural engagement. There is no "upness" in us. No verticality. We have an inheritance but we are not concerned with it. This in spite of the fact that the whole Christian life is a living in and by the very deposit and pledge of that inheritance, namely, the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). One way to put what the apostle is doing in the opening verses of 1 Peter is to say that he is *verticalizing* the land and, by implication, the various institutions of the Israelite theocracy. As redemptive history unfolds from the OT to the NT, the movement from Exodus out of Egypt, through the wilderness, into Canaan (the Promised Land) is repeated in such a way that the spiritual geography of the institutions of national Israel are *verticalized*.

We can put this as follows. In locating our inheritance in heaven, Peter is *verticalizing* the land inheritance of Israel (cf. the Book of Joshua where the land is repeatedly characterized as Israel's *inheritance*) and relocating it in heaven itself. The implications of this are momentous. Failure to grasp this is part of why we think of nations and land and inheritance in the linear, horizontal, earthly categories of the OT. If the land itself is verticalized, we might expect that the institutions grounded in the land would also be verticalized. And this is exactly what we find in the spiritual geography of the NT. The land itself is verticalized. Mt. Zion is now a heavenly reality (Heb. 12:22). We are heavenly Zionists. Jerusalem is now the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above (Heb. 12:22; Gal. 4:26). The temple-sanctuary is in heaven (Heb. 8:1-5; 9:11-28). The priestly ministry of the saints (Heb. 12:22-24) and our Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16; 8:1-5) now take place, not on earth, but in heaven. Finally, the Davidic throne from which the Davidic Son reigns, has also been verticalized (Lk. 1:32-33; Rev. 5:13). The Land, Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the Temple, the Priesthood, and the Davidic Throne – all *verticalized*.

It is eschatologically retrograde to live without this verticalization taking root in one's soul. And it is eschatologically retrograde to do politics, in theory or in

practice, as if our true country were just another non-verticalized entity in the welter of earthly geo-politics. We live here, but we are no longer from here.

G. Heavenly Hope

It might seem that given what we've said to this point it would be superfluous to add a section on the heavenly nature of Christian hope. And indeed, much of what we say here has been intimated above. But it will be good to gather the matter at hand under this precise theme, that we might feel the force and the glory of the NT's pervasive depiction of our hope.

By some estimates there are approximately 300 references to the second coming of Christ in the NT. There are precisely zero to transforming the culture of Illyricum, or Lystra, or Thessalonica. The object of the church's hope, and its heavenly and eschatological nature, is set before us relentlessly in Holy Scripture. Yet, while we would never formally deny it, it functions as something of footnote, a lovely outcome for the future, largely irrelevant to the residents of horizontalvilletm as they deal with the pressing concerns of the day. Just as there is no upness, no verticality in us, neither are we singed by the fire of the eschaton.

Let us briefly recap: Our city, our better and abiding possession, is in heaven. Our homeland is in heaven. The assembly in which we worship, and in which we live and move and have our being, is in heaven. Our citizenship (commonwealth) is in heaven. Our thoughts, our affections, our treasure, indeed our very lives, are in heaven. Our inheritance is in heaven. In all these cases we could add "and not on earth" or, minimally, "not primarily on earth." In short, our hope is in heaven. To delineate the textual support for this would be a book length project. But a few references (some new, some reiterations) are in order.

Hebrews 11:8-16 established that, even with the land grant of Canaan promised to him, Abraham's hope was heavenly and eschatological. He was looking for a city with foundations, the heavenly Jerusalem, which does not emerge from historical forces, but rather comes from the future, coming down

out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:5, 10-14). This was his, and all the OT saints', better and heavenly country.

The heavenly assembly, which we spoke of from Hebrews 12, is the inaugurated participation in the worship and glory of the new creation. It is the mode of our current reception of the unshakeable kingdom of God (12:28). This kingdom alone will survive the coming eschatological earthquake wherein the voice of God will shake the earth and the heavens, removing all created things (12:26-27). As such, worship in that assembly tears our affections and our hope away from all created, visible things (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

We also looked at Colossians 3 above. We saw that we, having been crucified and raised with Christ, are to seek the things above, having our affections there and *not* on earth (v.2). Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. Verse 4 says: When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. This is our location, our life, our hope. Hidden in Christ in heaven now, revealed in glory with him at his appearance.

We also spoke of our heavenly citizenship from Philippians 3. This other country, this commonwealth where we are citizens, is one from which we are awaiting an appearance: But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:20-21). We are awaiting a Savior from heaven. The IM thinks we are waiting for the church to get its act together so the gospel can have greater impact, or for the border to be closed, or for the next election, or for this or that political battle, or for some socio-cultural movement to work itself out.

We could ask the IM another question. In addition to “what is their country?” we could ask “what are they waiting for?” His answer is not likely to echo back the apostle Paul, who tells the church repeatedly that she is waiting for Jesus to appear from heaven to conform our lowly bodies to his glorious body, and to subject all things to himself. The posture of the whole Christian life from its inception, from when we turn from idols to serve the living and true God, is to *wait* for his Son from heaven, whom he raised for the dead, Jesus who delivers

us from the wrath to come (1 Thess.1:9-10). This is the eager expectation and fervent hope of the church.

Titus 2:11-13 is important here: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. What the church is waiting for is “our blessed hope,” which is not the transformation of America or the Christianizing of the nations, though that is functionally the blessed hope of many. Our blessed hope, however, is the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. This is *the* hope of the church. There are many other aspirations or “small h” hopes Christians and the church may have, but there is one towering singular (Capital H) hope which animates the life of the church.

Startlingly, 1 Peter 1:13 charges the church to “set your hope *fully* on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Not partially, but fully. The total hope of the church is seeing Jesus face to face in everlasting glory in the new creation. The consummation will bring the covenantal bond of communion to full fruition. When the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God, a loud voice from the throne, echoing the heart of the covenant (Jer. 31:33b, Heb. 8:10c), says: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” Rev. 21:3. The throne of God and the Lamb are in the new creation, and there, we are told: “his servants will worship him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22: 3b-4). Does the IM know we are longing for the consummation? No. He would probably describe us a bride who regularly Face-Times her fiancé in Europe, but is quite content not to have him return to consummate the marriage— as long as he keeps sending aid to help with life and the ongoing culture wars.

Let us back up a little in the canon and ask about the prophets. We can gather a good deal of what the prophets longed for from the apostolic understanding of their writings. Crucially here, Paul tells us twice in the book of Acts (23:6;

24:14, cf. 28:20) that the hope of Israel (not 'a' hope of Israel) is the (bodily) resurrection of the dead which, to be sure, has begun in Jesus Christ. This is what he is on trial for. He is not on trial for preaching the onset of an international Christian order. He testifies at Caesarea that he worships the God of the patriarchs, that He believes everything in the Law and the Prophets. He has a hope in God, like other Jews do, and this hope consists in the resurrection of both the just and the unjust (24:14-15). This is his hope, it is the hope of Israel, it is the hope embedded in the prophets (cf. Isaiah 25:6-9; Daniel 12:1-2).

Paul is not hoping for some sub-eschatological, earthly, provisional and reversible state of affairs. He has an imperishable, undefiled, unfading inheritance reserved for him in heaven (1 Pt. 1:4). This is his living hope. It is the hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pt. 1:3). After all, Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) of the eschatological harvest. The resurrection of the dead at the end of the age begins (or is at hand) in his resurrection. He is not the firstfruits, or the beginning of, a long era of earthly sub-eschatological political hopes. In him, nothing less than the eschaton itself arrives (1 Cor. 15:45-49). He is the firstfruits of the coming resurrection.

For this resurrection, Romans 8 makes clear, the whole creation groans, waiting with eager longing, yearning to be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (8:19-21). This incorruptible glory is coincident with the coming redemption of our bodies (v. 23). That is, the creation cries out for the consummation. The creation was subjected to futility in this very hope (8:20). Our hope should align with that of the whole fallen order. All creation (in all of its beauty and in all of its disorder) groans, acutely and unceasingly with the pains of childbirth until now (8:22). The creation is not groaning for the winning of a few school board elections, or even for making America great again. Desirable as these things may or may not be, they are not the reason for creation's agony.

Paul continues: And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (8:23). Along with, or as a part of, the creation, we groan for our bodies, now decaying (2 Cor. 4:16) and dead because of sin (Rom. 8:10), to be redeemed. A critical point here is that our inward groaning for the redemption of our bodies *just is* what those who have the firstfruits of the Spirit do. Groaning is not something believers do on occasion or when things are not going well. It is a permanent feature of the Christian life. It is what Spirit-filled people do. Thus, its absence does not leave us with some “less than groaning” version of the faith. It is rather, tragically, a sign that we are bereft of the Spirit. No groaning means no Spirit. These are not imperatives, they are indicatives. As a statement of fact, those who belong to Christ, who therefore possess the Spirit, groan for eschatological and heavenly ends.

The Apostle continues: For *in this hope* we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (8:24-25). This groaning can be construed negatively as a sighing under the afflictions of this age, or positively as a holy yearning for Christ’s appearing and the consummation. The two should not be pitted against each other for they both exist in the hearts of the saints.

Groaning is further explicated in 2 Corinthians 5: For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (v.1). Bodily existence is tent-like, sojourner existence. Our earthly home’s inevitable destruction gives way to an eternal and heavenly home. This is the bodily coordinate of the vertical displacement, which we’ve already discussed. We are not yet bodily displaced, but we do know it is coming. And the result is groaning.

For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling....For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life (5:2-5). The groaning, again, is clearly eschatological in

nature. It is a desire to be clothed in our heavenly dwelling. It is a yearning for what is mortal to be swallowed up by life. For Paul, this is clearly something which occurs at the coming resurrection. “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:54).

Paul continues: He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (5:5). Note, it is *this very thing*, the coming resurrection, the full possession of our heavenly inheritance, that God has (and is) preparing the church for. For this, he gives the Spirit as a guarantee. The Spirit is a pledge and a down-payment. A guarantee of what precisely? Certainly not victory in any of the causes which perpetually agitate the church. Rather, the Spirit is the pledge, the seal of the fulness of our eschatological salvation. For our salvation consists in communion with the Triune through Jesus Christ, in the Spirit. The Spirit inaugurates that communion by faith now, guaranteeing that, for the people of God, it will culminate in the beatific vision. The end of the Spirit’s work is heavenly glory.

Fitting us for this Day, the day of Jesus Christ, is the goal of the good work God has begun in us (Phil. 1:6). It is this that Jesus is currently described as doing in Hebrews 2:9, where we are told that he is bringing many sons to glory. And it is this for which Paul tells us he labors and suffers: Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory (2 Tim. 2:10). The byproduct or second-order socio-political effects of this bringing many sons to glory is, frankly, of little or no concern in the NT.

This looking to the coming heavenly glory is set before us in a shocking and devastating way in 2 Peter 3: But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be

set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (3:10-14)

In this coming Day, the heavens – the atmospheric heavens – will disappear with a roar. What water did in the global flood, fire will do in this global judgment. The very elements of the universe – probably a reference to all the heavenly bodies – will be destroyed by fire. They will melt in the heat, v.12 says. And the earth – *and everything done in it* – will be laid bare, found out, exposed to the fire of this divine coming. This conflagration – this cosmic fire – is mentioned here, and again in v.12 for emphasis.

We struggle mightily to assimilate this scene. Everything – nothing is exempt – the heavens, the elements, the earth, and everything done in the earth – everything we thought was solid, and firm, and enduring – disappears, is destroyed, is laid bare and burned. It is, as John Webster said of this passage, jolting. It confronts us with the “stark and devastating” reality of the Day of God. Now if the truth be told, this is offensive to some of us. It doesn’t seem to respect human culture, human history, or even the very created order itself. It’s a devastating, overwhelming scene. It certainly cannot loom large in any culture warrior’s consciousness. It is a ferocious frontal assault on our inability to separate the enduring invisible things from the temporal visible things. The things of chief importance from the superfluous, vaporizing things. The things we are sure are ultimate things – like the present heavens and earth – are in fact penultimate – good, but not ultimate.

But the cosmos will be – on the other side of this fire – renewed and restored. We are looking forward, v.13 says, to a new heavens and a new earth. The prophets, for example, in Isaiah 65 and 66, speak of a new heavens and a new earth. A place where injustice and violence are banished, where peace and righteousness reign. Here we see that the new heavens and the new earth appear on *the other side* of the second coming. This is true as well in Revelation 21, where the new creation appears after the final judgment. When the old creation is destroyed, then the new emerges. While justice to some

extent can be done now, the current heavens and earth cannot be the place where righteousness dwells as envisioned by the apostle. For that, the cosmos needs to be scoured by eschatological fire.

As bracing as this vision is, notice this about our orientation to this future Day: V. 12: “we are waiting for and hastening the coming Day of God.” V. 13 “we are looking forward to (or waiting for) a new heaven and new earth.” V. 14 says “since you are waiting for these things.” Three times in three verses we are said to be waiting for or looking to this day. This great day, and the new creation on the other side of it, is the joy, the longing, the hope of the church. Does the IM know us as eagerly waiting for and hastening this day?

Finally, let us close this section on our heavenly hope with 1 John 3:2-3: Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Our hope is the coming, the appearance of Jesus, for at that coming we will be like him. And having this heavenly hope, far from being irrelevant, is the deepest incentive to purity. Those who have it “purify themselves as he is pure.”

In short, the cry: Come, Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:17, 20; 1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Matt. 6:10) is the cry for the king and the kingdom to come. It expresses our longing for the heavenly country to descend in all its Christ-centric radiance. This heavenly hope – and no other – is built into the very nature of gospel ministry (Col. 1:5, 2 Tim. 4:1-2, 8). This is the hope in which we were saved, the hope for which we patiently wait (Romans 8:24-25). The hope of cosmic, transfiguring glory (Col.1:27; Rom. 5:2).

II. The Shape of Public Witness

A. The Horizontal

Having described the missing country, and our relation to it, we turn now to present an initial sketch of our horizontal engagement. We seek to describe

the shape, and a few of the chief characteristics, of political (or public) engagement for those who have undergone the vertical displacement into their heavenly homeland. Thus, this section should be considered a preface to second half of this essay.

If it is unclear at this point, let us state plainly that we do not deny that we still live along the temporal axis of this age, on this earth, in this country, and so forth. We are not yet, in our bodily existence, in the eschaton. The substance of our lives is in heaven, removed from the plane of this world, hidden with Christ in God. We are raised and renewed in our inner man (Eph. 2:6; 2 Cor. 4:16). Yet here we are, in our decaying embodied existence having to negotiate life in this age with all of its incumbent demands. Usually, when the considerations concerning our heavenly homeland are set forth there is an immediate (and often defensive) reaction. It can be summarized in a simple question: “What about the horizontal?” Or, some variant, such as, “What about now?”

Let’s address this question. First, it must be said that the question itself often reflects the very disorder we are trying to address. It reflects the near idolatrous attachment to earth and earthly realities (all from a “Christian” vantage point of course) which we seek, under the direction of the text of Scripture, to dislodge. There is now, in the conservative church, a mindset which can stand under a waterfall of texts about our heavenly city, country, homeland, citizenship, inheritance, and hope; about the need for heavenly mindedness, the need for our treasure and affections to be in heaven, about the groaning which characterizes the whole creation and the Christian, and which yearns for our Beloved, about the Spirit as deposit and pledge of all this, about hastening the coming Day and so forth, and then simply say: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, but what about now?” In the blinding noonday light of all these texts, such people always arrive at Damascus unmolested.

One would think the reaction would be a desire to embrace the verticality; to see the heavenly glory set forth in passage after passage and ask questions about how to embody it’s radiant beauty, and to seek to cultivate a serious and sustained heavenly-mindedness. But, alas. The heavenly vision rarely enthralls

or enchants. Not the way MAGA does. So it's nearly always, "what about the horizontal?" The question works with the assumption that the vertical and the horizontal are two distinct dimensions of the Christian life. As if to say, "verticality and all that is fine in its place (whatever that may be), but we have lives to live and a country to serve, and families to attend to, and what about that?"

The reply runs roughly like this. Vertical and horizontal concerns are not distinct, and there is certainly no competition between them. Even a casual glance at the texts we've adduced above would show that verticality is entailed in Christian conversion. It is sealed in Christian baptism. It is the outcome of our union with Christ in his death, resurrection and ascension. Verticality is not a segment or an aspect of the Christian vision. The realities set forth in Colossians 3:1-4, for example, do not speak to a portion of the Christian life. They map, or overlay, the whole sphere of Christian discipleship. All of it. Without remainder. Without any "what about?" The horizontal is not in the least separable from, or a departure from, verticality. The horizontal dimensions of Christian existence are a reflection, or an echo of, the vertical. They are the sphere in which verticality works itself out. All horizontal tasks, from the most menial to the most exalted, are done by those who have been raised with Christ and are to seek the things above.

Paul does not say we should set our minds on things above, unless of course we are discussing American culture, then heaven must recede. Jesus does not say our treasure, and thus our hearts, should be in heaven, unless of course we are doing horizontal things. Then, please, have some treasure and some of your heart on earth. Paul does not teach that we groan for eschatological glory unless of course we are changing the oil or managing our money, then we can lay groaning aside. Neither does he say your heavenly citizenship should recede in an election year. The point is clear. The elect, those who are supernaturally quickened and raised up by the Spirit in Christ, live and move and have their being – at all times & in all situations – in the heavenly places in Christ. Christians do not tumble out of the heavenly assembly so that they can

get down to business in the things of earth. “Non-Verticalized Christian” is an oxymoron.

We can tease out the relationship a bit more precisely as follows. Even things we might associate with verticality, things like prayer, meditation, and worship, are done by embodied human beings living, at least according to their outer man, along the horizontal time axis of this world. In this age, verticality always has a horizontal coordinate. On the other hand, as we’ve indicated, the horizontal is always done by fully verticalized people. This turns the mundane into acts of heavenly minded worship and eschatological longing. We can state the interconnected relation as follows: The vertical always has a horizontal coordinate, but is not thereby horizontalized. It remains in essence a vertical reality in Christ. An example of this would be public worship. It is an intrinsically vertical action, an entering into the heavenly assembly of Hebrews 12:22-24. Yet, it has an earthy address, a location where its outer form is manifested. But it is not, by this reality, turned into a horizontal phenomenon. It remains a vertical reality with an outward earthly aspect.

On the other hand, horizontal actions (e.g., teaching, cleaning, exercising, landscaping, etc.) remain horizontal. By which we mean that the act itself is not transformed. A swept floor remains a swept floor. Such acts belong, for the most part, to life in this present evil age. They are morally good. They have their own intrinsic dignity. We should engage in them with prudence and joy, but they are penultimate acts. They belong to this temporary, common grace order under the Noahic covenant. Yet, and this is crucial, we are to do them as verticalized people. In this sense, they become for us acts of worship offered unto God. The horizontal serves the vertical. It is restrained, but it is neither swallowed up nor ignored by the eschatological and heavenly. The vertical, we said earlier, has a horizontal coordinate. The horizontal has a vertical agent. In no case is verticality muted, paused, or supplemented, as if it were a mode for only a portion of the Christian life.

Once we grasp this, that the horizontal is enveloped by the vertical, and is simply another sphere in which it is expressed, one can see just how

pernicious these “what about now?” questions are. Put simply: Any non-heavenly minded horizontal engagement is sub-Christian. The Christian life, life in the Spirit, life in the resurrected Christ, is eschatological all the way down. Verticality marks all Christian existence, not a part of it. Our very questions assume it can somehow be cordoned off. It’s a tragic blindness. Those who show no evidence of possessing another, better, and heavenly country, are told about it, and all they can say is “what about *this* country?” A politics, or even a conception of the Christian faith more generally, marked by vertical heavenly mindedness seems like a virtual impossibility. It is inconceivable to huge swaths of conservative evangelicalism.

B. Exilic Consciousness

The absence of this verticality tragically produces another. Namely, the absence of a consciousness of our status as strangers and exiles. Verticalized people are displaced people. They are exiles with respect to this age; with respect to the world in its current fallen state. Verticality produces a disruption along the linear axis of this world’s time. A fundamental breach with the entire age. We have been delivered, Paul says, out of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). We are not to be conformed to the age (Rom. 12:2). This is not merely because we are morally different than the world around us, though that is to be true, it is because, as risen and ascended with Christ, we belong to the age to come (Heb. 6:5). We are not merely dissenters or minorities, we have been displaced, disrupted, verticalized. Thus, we are exiles.

Here we should note that speaking vertically of the movement from earth to heaven, or temporally as being delivered from this age and partaking of the age to come, are, for my purposes here, two ways of expressing the same reality, one being spatial and the other being temporal. They entail one another and the Bible uses both sets of metaphors. We are already living out of the age to come, and we are already raised and seated in the heavenlies. With respect to space, we belong to and dwell in heaven. With respect to time, we belong to

and partake of the age to come. We are aliens, not merely in America, but to the current space-time constitution of this fallen world order.

The early chapters of First Peter join our rebirth into a heavenly hope and inheritance with our exilic status. We are elect exiles (1:1). We are to conduct ourselves with fear throughout the time of our exile (1:17). We wage war against the flesh as exiles (2:11). We've already alluded to Heb. 11:13 which speaks of the OT saints' apprehension of the promises: Having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. To greet the eschatological realities, even if from afar by faith, entails the corresponding acknowledgement that we are "strangers and exiles on the earth." We live on the earth as those already displaced to heaven. If we have no living eschatological apprehension of the promises, we will have no exilic consciousness.

As one scans the evangelical Christian community in our cultural moment, (apart from perhaps more Anabaptist influenced communities) does one hear any exilic voices? During the pandemic there were voices pro and con on a range of issues, but there were no exiles. We speak as lords of the realm, the rightful owners of the country who need to defend or recapture it. We are the indignant native majority which will not tolerate marginalization. The vocabulary, as well as the ethos, of being aliens has vanished.

We live out of a frame where becoming Christian is conceived of as merely giving us aid from above, grace with which we can continue our horizontal, earthly existence with greater resources. Sure, we have communion with heaven. There is a sort of connection, a relation in the Spirit, but we remain – without remainder – on earth. One can picture this as God in heaven, with us on earth, mutually interacting as we move along the temporal horizontal axis (the x axis) of life until either death or the return of Christ. This is the default picture of Christian existence in most all of our heads. And it is false – seriously so. In this frame we suffer no wrenching displacement, and none of its agonizing tension. Our relationship to this age and its powers suffers no fundamental disorientation, no destabilization, it is in no way problematized or

disrupted. We, and our secular opponents, are all players on the same field, playing the same power games for the same prizes. Only we do it (or seek to do it), allegedly, in a Christian fashion.

But let's be clear: it's a game in which neither side views itself as exiles in the earth. When it comes to heavenly displacement, all are brothers under the skin. In fact, we can put this more provocatively. The most radical left-wing activist – let's say a ferocious transgender advocate – and the most radical right-wing activist – let's say a fierce MAGA partisan – agree on the deep structural nature of the political situation. They both agree that it is this earth, this age, this geo-political country, these institutions, this Congress, this Supreme Court, this Presidency, this array of earthly power and coercive force, which is *the* place where the battle is waged. This is *the* prize for which both contend. Such is the deep political agreement of un-displaced residents. In fact, it has become clear that the left side of this polarized debate is less of a threat to conservative churches than the right side. Our churches are highly unlikely to adopt or be seduced by transgender ideology. But we are infected with an uncritical flag-waiving, quasi-idolatrous nationalism. An idolatry from which exiles alone are immunized.

C. Exilic Minimalism

Lacking exilic consciousness, we have excessive and easy horizontalism. This is why there is so much casual linear engagement in our political conversation where the church (or some ministry) functions like just another player, only with a different toolkit. The church has to do X to solve Y, or do Y to solve Z. Call this non-exilic horizontal maximalism. Apparently the church needs to do a wide array of things. She may need to create new economic policies, she may need to defend the Constitution, she may need to spawn new institutions to replace the collapsing global liberal order, she may need to respond to this emerging phenomenon, or that declining feature of cultural life. This growing

list of things the church must do is nearly limitless. And, I would add, tacitly semi-Pelagian.

Who knew she needed this endless expertise, or this nimble socio-political acumen? Certainly not Paul who determined to know nothing but Christ Jesus and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). What a politically naïve fundamentalist he must have been! He seems quite content with telling his churches to cling to and proclaim the word of the gospel, to live godly lives, to love to their neighbors, and to expect suffering, as they await the appearing of Christ. He could kill the whole industry of Christian social theory if we ever took him seriously. Does the advice that regularly pours out about what “we need to do about the culture” sound anything like the apostolic advice given to the churches? Of course not. It is the advice of residents for residents, not the advice of apostles for their exilic communities. In fact, if you think of the surrounding culture the Corinthian Christians faced, to choose just one example, where is the charge for sophisticated cultural engagement with a transformative aim?

The New Testament writers, other than acknowledging the hostile environment, prescribe no agenda other than the worship of God and the living of a holy life in the way of the cross. And, of course, waiting for the eschaton (1 Cor. 1:7). Now that is a substantive calling, and there is more to it than meets the eye, but to many it would appear thin, even retreatist, and lacking in cultural or political specificity. In fact, Paul denies that he (or the Corinthians) have any role in judging the immoral or the idolatrous outside the church. He leaves them in the hands of God. Judgment is about purifying the church (1 Cor. 5:9-13), for judgment has begun with the house of God (1 Pt. 4:17). Thus, we are to conduct ourselves in fear during the time of our exile (1 Pt. 1:17).

Let’s try and state, more positively, what ethics for exiles looks like. Peter writes to a wide swath of Christians in Asia Minor who have undergone this glorious vertical displacement. Coupled with the virtual guarantee of suffering, the heart of his social ethic can be stated as follows: Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those

who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pt. 2:13-17)

That's it. Even a casual reading of 1 Peter reveals one who is neither a Kuyperian nor an advocate of Dominion Theology. The yield as far as transformation and Christian hegemony, he is unconcerned with. It's simple faithfulness to a short list of simple commands that he cares about. Verse 17 alone would essentially capture it in its entirety: Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Analysis of the Roman Empire, its borders, its leadership, its institutions, its regional and local distinctives, its immigration patterns, its wars, nothing of this is foisted on the church as its duty. There are no policy prescriptions to enact, no unjust states of affairs to be overthrown. No long-term realpolitik strategizing, no alternative futures to be imagined – other than the eschaton, the only future to which Peter continually directs the church: Fix your hope completely (or set your hope fully) on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation (the apocalypse) of Jesus Christ (1:13).

This sort of radical orientation of our hope to the eschaton, is the *sine qua non* for exilic pilgrim existence. In fact, we might say that there is a connection between a lively heavenly hope and a robust, but socially chastened (or politically underspecified) ethic. For example, after commanding us to fix our full hope on the eschaton, Peter continues: As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1:14-16). It is our hope which drives our pervasive holiness “in all our conduct.” Ethics arise out of the eschaton. Or, stated differently, the eschaton penetrates back into our souls to form and order them aright. Ethics *start* with the End. And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile (1:17). It is the prospect of our Father as Judge which undergirds an exilic life lived in holy fear. Holiness

begins with heavenly mindedness. The weightlessness of our other, better country, skews the whole field of Christian life.

As we saw above, 2 Pt. 3 speaks of the coming fiery conflagration which will issue in the new creation. That reality conditions the ethical teaching in the same context: Since all these things are thus to be dissolved (note: not transformed), what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God (3:11-12a). Again, asking the basic ethical question, “what sort of people should you be?” does not come before, but rather after, “since all these things are thus to be dissolved.” The same order is found in v.14: Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace (3:14). The ethical flows out of the eschatological.

In Colossians 3, which we examined above, the grounding of our lives in Christ, and thus in heaven, is the context for effectually putting sin to death in our members and clothing ourselves in Christ and his virtues (Col. 3:5-17). Titus 2:12-13 demonstrates the same conjunction. Waiting for the blessed hope of Christ’s appearing is the atmosphere of renouncing ungodliness and living self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age. In all of these cases the imperatives given to the church are straightforward. They reduce to living a godly life which consists in mortifying sin and clothing oneself in Christ and seeking to serve others. “Love God and love your neighbor” (Mt. 22:34-40) still summarizes and comprehends the whole Christian ethic.

It’s political to be sure, inasmuch as it shapes life in the earthly city. Yet it is blissfully unconcerned for what passes for “political” in our circles. It would be slanderous to call this retreat or escapist or pessimistic. It is certainly not gnostic or Platonist. It takes the horizontal engagement of the church with the world with utmost seriousness. But it is minimalist, sober, and chastened. Above all, it is unconcerned with the impact going the way of the cross might have on the surrounding culture. The exile views himself, and the church, as the great company of sinners (2 Tim. 1:15) in need of radical transformation,

not the outside world. Such are the ethics of displaced and eschatologically oriented people. People who have another country. Ethics for exiles.

As an aside, think here of the Book of Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it or from where. We don't know who the recipients are or where they reside. We know nothing for sure about the local political situation they face. We don't even know what decade the letter was written in. And we can't deduce any of this for sure from the internal evidence of the epistle itself. That's how indifferent the author is about the local and regional political situation on the ground.

D. Suffering and Cruciformity

We've alluded to the expectation of suffering above. Let us expand that briefly. Repeatedly, the NT charges the church to arm itself for suffering (1 Pt. 4:1). Indeed, she mysteriously partakes of the very sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24, 2 Cor. 1:5, 1 Pt. 4:13). Suffering is coterminous with resurrection life in this age. They are not alternating or sequential realities. We *always* carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our bodies (2 Cor 4:10). The sufferings of Christ *and* his comfort our ours in abundance (2 Cor. 1:5). Resurrection power *is* conformity to Christ's death in this age (Phil. 3:10). Glory, then, takes the form of suffering in this age (cf. 1 Pt. 4:14 where the Spirit of *glory* rests on the suffering Christian). They are decoupled only in the age to come. Space forbids expounding more robustly the NT conception of suffering. For our purposes here it is sufficient to say that our political theologies do not give the role of suffering a central and integral place. Suffering is a thing to be muted, marginalized and eliminated by our politics, thus it cannot play the role it plays in the NT conception of our public lives. Thus, it is beyond implausible for us to consider the persecuted blessed (Mt. 5:10-12).

Suffering means our ethical engagement has two deeply related features. First, suffering, ours and that of the whole created order, means our witness is not triumphalistic. It is the witness of people sobered by the reality of suffering as a constitutive part of human existence until the eschaton. Suffering marks this

age, glory the age to come (Rom 8:17 ff.) Thus, suffering in this age produces an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17-18) in the next. Second, this means our witness consists of the imitation of Christ in the way of the cross. Cruciformity is the shape of our whole witness, thus it is the shape of our public, political witness. We are not sure what to make of this. It sounds pious but utterly impractical. It sounds like the type of thing the only pacifists say. It doesn't translate into any kind of winning strategy. We want a non-exilic, non-cruciform political vision. In fact, if you ask of a given political vision, precisely how the cross is integrated into it, the answer is usually "it is not." "What would a politics of the cross require of us here?" is a question we do not even ask.

Yet, Peter makes this call to cruciformity explicit in 1 Pt. 2:21b-23. Christ left us an example to follow in his steps. The atonement is not *merely* a moral exemplar, but it is a moral exemplar. Christ, Peter says, committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. It is crucial to see that Peter thinks we are to imitate the public witness of Christ given to the unjust political and religious authorities who were about to execute him. Peter refers to our Lord's whole earthly life to be sure, but he is focused on his behavior during his passion and at his death. Christ's witness was lamblike. It was characterized by suffering, forgiving love for his enemies. When he suffered, he did not threaten. When reviled, he did not revile in return. He entrusted himself to him who judges justly. That is, he waited for eschatological vindication in the resurrection. This, Peter says, is to be the shape of the church's political witness, even under unjust regimes.

Of course, Peter's voice is not alone. It reflects the uniform testimony of Scripture. The early church was honored to be dishonored for the name (Acts 5:31). We are indignant. We seek legislation to forbid suffering any dishonor for the name. Jesus says the state of persecution, of revilement for the sake of righteousness, is a blessed state (Mt. 5:11-12). We say it is not. He says it is the possession of the kingdom of heaven. We think it is a sign of powerlessness and thus, defeat. He says it's something to rejoice and be glad in because it

accumulates for us great reward in heaven. We say it means we are losing the culture war. We prefer our reward now, thank you. We are like James and John, the original dominion theologians, who wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Christ in glory, without understanding either the nature of the glory, or the cup of suffering with which one must be baptized before partaking of it.

The ethic of the New Testament, exemplified with particular fulness in the beatitudes (and the Sermon on the Mount generally), doesn't sound like an interesting plan to most of our political pundits. We have our own Book of Alternative Beatitudes. Things we wish Jesus said, but didn't. Beatitudes for Americans. "Blessed are you when you have so transformed and Christianized the culture that power is now in your hands, and you are no longer reviled or slandered for my name's sake, but rather you can decide who gets persecuted. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward on earth, for so were the fortunes of the prophets before you."

E. Detachment

One final perspective on ethics for exilic and eschatological people. We've already seen that they are sober, chastened and simple. They are cruciform and expect suffering throughout this age. They are unconcerned with transformational effect. They live off a hope which is entirely eschatological. Let's add one more feature. They are characterized by radical *detachment*. Eschatological people are extracted people. Displaced people are detached. They have deep critical distance. They have a stranger's indifference.

Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Among a raft of neglected texts, this one may vie for the title of "the text that political theology simply forgot." This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

Let those who have wives live as if they had none! I've not heard that as part of any proposed family-friendly legislation from our current Christian political theorists. Given what Paul writes in Ephesians 5 about the roles of husbands and wives, this is surely not a call to neglect. The point is simple. Marriage belongs to this age and we do not. The primordial, most basic horizontal human institution, is ephemeral. Jesus himself de-prioritizes the biological family for the eschatological and heavenly family of the church (Mark 3:31-35). Thus, the first order of business is to generate radical detachment in order to see the institution in its evanescent character. In the comforts of marriage and home we must refuse to forget our exilic status. We must refuse to settle comfortably into the domesticated sub-eschatological faith of the undisplaced. Paul wants us to see things aright. He wants order and proportion and that means a wrenching detachment. Let those who have wives live as if they had none! Those who mourn should live as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing (v. 30). Do the thing, and, at the same time, relativize and even negate the thing you are doing. Let the paradox and the ambiguity, the sense of detachment without abandonment, stand. There's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all.

If one were to say to Paul: "how is any of this even possible?" they would be tapping into the mystery of those whose life, whose treasure, whose affections, whose citizenship, and whose hope, are fixed in heaven, and yet they still live on earth. How is any of *that* even possible? Those who buy, Paul continues, should be as though they had no goods. Engage in the economic systems of the world as one who has no stake in them. Is this akin to any economic strategy on offer? The economics of detached indifference? It was, however, the economics of those who not only accepted, but joyfully accepted the plundering of their property knowing that they had a better and abiding possession (Hebrews 10:34). Can one imagine anything akin to this sentiment among us? We stockpile weapons to kill those who threaten our property.

Finally, the apostle generalizes his point. Those who deal with the world should be as though they had no dealings with it. That is deep, comprehensive, exilic

indifference. And the reason for this stunning sequence of commands is that “the present form of this world is passing away.” The time is short (v. 29) because the eschatological order has apocalyptically broken into the world in Jesus Christ, thus “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Pt. 4:7). The judgment has begun, and it begins with the household of God (1 Pt. 4:17). We are awaiting the fiery cataclysm of the Day of God on the other side of which is the new heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pt. 3:11-13). Thus the form of the world is passing away (1 Jn. 2:17). Apparently, Paul does not think the world is being Christianized, nor its rulers, who, he says, are coming to nothing (1 Cor. 2:6).

Only an alien, one who belongs decisively to another country, could give the advice of 1 Cor. 7:29-31. Here Paul’s detachment produces discernment. And this discernment of the eschatologically conditioned state the church finds itself in will relativize and reorder her disordered attachments. In short, one could summarize the whole of this paper, with four D’s. Vertical Displacement produces Disruption with respect to the linear time and space of the present evil age, which produces the Detachment which we just surveyed, resulting in true, well-ordered Discernment. Displacement, Disruption, Detachment, Discernment. In that order.

One only needs to read the Epistle to Diognetus (from the 2nd c.) to see the distance of our situation from that of the early church:

5:4 But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. 5:5 They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign.

The last sentence is insightful. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. That is the paradoxical engagement, the relativization, and even the negation, of their earthly country, which is nothing

other than an outworking of the kind of detachment we saw Paul speak of above. We should have the same passion for American politics that we would have for Spanish politics, if we took a three week vacation to Spain. Spain is not our country, and we are soon to be removed from it to our true homeland. In fact, to continue the analogy, even while in Spain we have already been displaced and carried back in our inner being to America. It would invoke questions about our sanity if we were perpetually agitated about Spanish politics on our vacation. Engage in Spanish politics as those who do not belong to Spanish politics. Every foreign land can be our fatherland and every fatherland is foreign to us.

III. Conclusion

Now, the reason the NT is so radically different in its fundamental, structural orientation than the American church, brings us back to our opening remarks.

The apostles, and the apostolic churches have *another* country. For all intents and purposes, we do not. They have suffered, and they embody, the verticality, the displacement, the exilic consciousness, the detachment that is intrinsic to union with the risen Christ. We began with Hebrews 11, verse 8 and following, let's conclude by looking at vv. 15-16: If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

There are plenty of opportunities to return, in spirit, if not in the body, to our earthly country of origin. It is always beckoning. The patriarchs in, or on their way to, Canaan could have thought nostalgically or wistfully on their homeland and turned back. But they did not. We face the same choice in our hyper-politicized moment. The IM, I contended at the outset, has no idea we have another country. But we do, and it is not merely another. It is, v.16 says, a better country, a heavenly one. Even a renewed America is not worthy to be compared to its glory. Indeed, it is a kind of squalor.

As mentioned in the preface, this paper has not tried to do anything substantial when it comes to concrete policy questions (e.g., immigration, healthcare, etc.) in American public life. There is a reason for that. I seek simply to stimulate us to undergo the displacement and to embrace and experience the verticality of union with the ascended Christ. We cannot go straight to the seemingly urgent questions of political engagement. We cannot bypass our disrupting relocation into heaven, the true homeland of our heart's desires. We must live out this reality, which is first pure, gracious indicative. You are raised and seated with Christ. You have another, better, heavenly country. This is not something that needs to be conjured. But the gift becomes a task. The indicative leads to the imperative. Be heavenly-minded. Set your affections on things above and not on things on earth.

The contention, then, is that we must suffer the displacement (or, acknowledging the indicative, embrace the already given displacement) before proceeding. Things will look different, very different, to the extent that we do experience it – for it is nothing short of a transposition to another land. I have tried to argue (or sketch out) the idea that all NT ethics are post-displacement ethics. Yet, the displacement itself remains the urgent need of the day, both for the peace of the church, and for the health of her political life. We cannot presume to know all that lies on the other side, any more than we can know all that is entailed in moving to another country.

Finally, notice that of those who desire a better country, a heavenly one, we are told, remarkably, that “that God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” We are again summoned back to the city, the heavenly city, for which Abraham looked. But something startling appears here. The eschatological city is prepared for those who leave their earthly country and seek a better, heavenly one. There are no non-displaced residents, no dwellers of horizontalville™, in the eschatological city. It is inhabited by those who are characterized as the possessors, even now, of another country. Of such, we are told, God is not ashamed to be called their God. This is unprecedented Scriptural language. Do we dare say aloud what seems to be the implication? Namely, that God *is* ashamed to be called the

God of those who are not characterized as having a better, heavenly country?
May it never be so of us! May God grant us to be among those he is not
ashamed to call his people. The people who have another country, and for
whom he has prepared a city. Amen.