Is There a Biblical Basis for the Common Good?

Scott Shauf, Bluefield College
Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy, July 17-21, 2007
Regents Park College, Oxford, UK

I am certain that most Christians would earnestly hope and expect that the answer to the question that is the title of this essay would be a resounding "yes." While my discussion will not ultimately disappoint in this regard, the answer actually turns out to be rather complex. In fact, I do *not* think it is possible to argue that the Bible has a *unified* vision of the common good. Nor is there a direct discussion of the idea of the common good anywhere in scripture. The positive answer instead comes from an examination of the historical movement of the way God's people have understood God to have dealt with humanity. When we look at this historical process as it unfolds in scripture, we can see a picture emerging that Christians today can take seriously in formulating our ideas about our contribution to and participation in the common good. Given the emphasis Baptists have generally placed on the central place of the Bible in our beliefs and practices, I would hope that such an understanding would be especially beneficial to Baptists engaged in the conversation.

The common thread that will wind throughout the historical survey to follow is the problem of simply defining the phrase "common good." Both words turn out to be problematic: Who is considered "common"? What is "good"? We will thus keep these questions in mind as we proceed.

A False Starting Place

Before we embark on the historical survey, we must first dispense with a false starting place. A common way for Christians to address the issue of our engagement with the broader public, including the idea of our contribution to the common good, is to begin with the saying of Jesus to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."[1] The saying is reported with

[1] New Testament quotations are my own translations unless otherwise specified. Old Testament quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise specified.

slight variation in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). Baptists and many other Christians have often used this saying to justify a "two kingdoms" split in allegiance, i.e. to God and to the state. In this view, participating in the common good can easily be seen as a part of the Christian obligation to support the state. While both the historical context surrounding this passage and the history of its exegesis are quite complex, even a brief study of the passage demonstrates that it cannot bear such a weighty interpretation.

All three Synoptic Gospels emphasize that the question to which Jesus was responding, viz. whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not, was not a sincere inquiry into Jesus' views on such matters but rather an attempt to trap him. It is generally supposed that the trap was to get him to align himself either with the revolutionary forces of the zealots, which could get such a public figure like Jesus into considerable trouble, or else with the pro-Roman collaborators like the tax-collectors, which likely would have discredited Jesus in the eyes of most of the people. Jesus' answer avoids both options, and it is the observers' amazement at his skill at avoiding the trap that concludes the episode in all three accounts. None of the Gospels provides any clear interpretation of what Jesus actually meant by the saying. The emphasis of the story is on Jesus' deft handling of the situation rather than on any theological lesson to be taken from it.

We thus must tread lightly when interpreting this particular logion of Jesus. Two points do seem clear, however. First, Jesus permits, even requires, the paying of taxes. That may seem like a benign point to us, but in Jesus' context it does situate him religiously and politically in a certain way. In AD 6 Judas of Galilee, the founder of the zealot movement, had declared that paying tribute to the Romans made one a non-Jew and an idolater (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.117-118; 7.252-258; *Antiquities* 18.4-10). This zealot movement lasted throughout and beyond the lifetime of Jesus and ultimately instigated the Jewish revolt against Rome in AD 66. Jesus' answer thus clearly distinguishes his own political and religious position from that of the zealots. Second, Jesus states that Caesar is not God. That may again seem rather obvious, but in fact the coin Jesus refers to in the story, the *denarius*, bore the inscription

"Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus."[2] The coin itself was a claim to Caesar's divinity. Jesus rejects that claim even while accepting Caesar's authority to collect taxes.

Beyond these two clear points it is difficult to state confidently the meaning of Jesus' reply. The first part of the saying may be taken in opposite directions, either as a recognition of Caesar's legitimate authority or rather as an expression of his utter contempt for Caesar and his "things." One way of seeing this ambiguity is by examining the meaning of the Greek word traditionally translated here as "render," *apodidōmi*. One meaning of this verb is "to give back." If one takes it this way, Jesus says something like, "Give Caesar his stuff back." That might be understood simply as an expression of Caesar's irrelevancy—Caesar and his lucre don't matter for God's purposes, so why bother with him?[3] Or it might be taken more as a challenge—Caesar should keep his idolatrous coin-images to his blasphemous self.[4] While these possibilities sound intriguing to many today, *apodidōmi* can also simply mean "to pay"; it is, in fact, the word commonly used when making payments. The fact that the same word is used for actions toward both Caesar and God might suggest that Jesus is indeed commanding respect to both, thus not contempt for Caesar at all. Even if this is the case, however, the question of what actually is owed to Caesar remains open. Granted that the coins he himself mints belong to him, does anything else? The passage could well be taken to circumscribe sharply what is owed to Caesar.

We are thus left with a variety of possible meanings for the passage. The basic intent of Jesus can in fact be interpreted to move in opposite directions. When Jesus says to "render to Caesar" does he say it in all seriousness, or rather with a sneer on his face? Either way, Jesus' statement cannot be interpreted as setting up two separate—potentially large or even equal—obligations. One's obligation to Caesar may be seen as genuine or as a contemptuous concession, but either way the obligation must be

[2] This fact is found in many commentaries on the passages, e.g. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 312.
[3] For such a view, see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (revised ed.; Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 225-226.
[4] Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 312, suggests this meaning.

seen in light of one's overarching duty towards God. That certainly seems to be the intent of the last half of the saying.

Whichever way we go with Jesus' saying, it would be difficult to use the passage specifically to talk about the common good. Even if we take Jesus' command in the most serious way possible, i.e. as stressing one's responsibility to Caesar, only the most elite of the Jews in Israel in this time period would have considered paying taxes to Caesar or anything Caesar might have provided in return to be "good." An obligation is not the same as a good. And of course the story of the Gospels bears it out that the power of Caesar is anything but good. While the Gospels emphasize the responsibility of the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus, there is no doubt in any of them of the Roman authorities' hand in it.

The saying thus cannot bear the weight often put upon it without reading a great deal into the text. It is one of those passages for which any given interpretation really says more about the interpreter's stances on matters than it does about Jesus' or the biblical writers' views. This is why it should be considered a false starting place. Given this problem, what I want to suggest, as mentioned earlier, is that a better way to see a biblical basis for the common good is by looking at historically how one can see such an idea emerging out of the narratives of God's people. We will begin with the earliest accounts in the Old Testament and work our way forward through the New.

The Old Testament

The creation account in Genesis 1 presents a picture of all of creation being oriented toward the benefit of common humanity. When God judges at the end of the sixth day that everything has been made "very good" (1:31), this judgment certainly must include God's special blessing on humans, including their dominion over other life and plenty of food being provided for them to eat (1:27-30). The common good, understood as referring to all of humankind, does seem to be at the heart of God's intention in creation. After the expulsion from the garden of Eden, however, this interest in the broad welfare of humankind wanes considerably. The chief stories that follow, those of Noah and the tower of

Babel, certainly feature broad human populaces, but they are stories of God's judgment on humanity rather than his action for human welfare.

Beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12, the Old Testament story becomes heavily focused on a small subset of humankind, eventually of course becoming the nation of Israel as a whole. God's initial call to Abraham concludes with the often quoted dictum, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3b), but as the story is actually told it is much more the first part of God's promise that unfolds: "I will make of you a great nation…I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (12:2-3a). Here we begin to see the problem of speaking of the "common" good in the Old Testament. If by "common" one means "common to the people of Israel," then one could reasonably say that the topic pervades the Old Testament writings. It is more difficult to speak of the common good with any broader notion of who is considered common.

The point is easily illustrated by looking at the stories of Joseph and the exodus. The large purpose of Joseph's story is to preserve the covenantal line of Abraham. Joseph's words at the end of Genesis sum up the point well. He begins by stating God's purpose "for good" to his brothers: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (50:20). While one might be tempted here to see the notion of "good" as applying fairly broadly—the Egyptians, after all, were saved from famine, too—the subsequent words of Joseph make it clear that his primary meaning is otherwise: "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24b). When we turn to the exodus events, it becomes patent: God's concern is for the Israelites, not the Egyptians. As God instructs Moses to speak to Pharoah on God's behalf (Exod 9:15-16):

> For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth.

Or as God says later to Moses (Exod 10:1b-2):

> Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may

> show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the LORD.

And, finally, as the Israelites are on the way out of Egypt, God says again to Moses (Exod 14:4):

> I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.

The Egyptians, especially Pharaoh, are manipulated throughout the account for the greater glory of God and the miraculous escape of the Israelites.

The exodus naturally sets the stage for the bulk of the Old Testament story.[5] To rehearse the point throughout the rest of the narratives would be overkill. I think it is evident to most readers that the Old Testament narratives are heavily focused on Israel in their scope. Other nations and individuals are brought into the story only to the extent that they have some role to play in what happens to Israel, and interest in such folks is limited to their relationships with Israel. This is the case in the remainder of the Pentateuch's telling of the march to the promised land, in the account of Joshua's conquest involving the extermination and utter subjugation of the native Canaanite inhabitants, in the stories of the judges' struggles against threats from the remaining peoples, and in the narratives covering the rise and fall of the Israelite kingdoms. The welfare of non-Israelites is simply seldom of concern. Even in places where there is genuine concern for non-Israelites, such concern is generally dependent upon the fact that they are in relationship with Israel. For instance, a number of levitical laws require just treatment of aliens, but such laws apply only to aliens residing in Israel (e.g. Lev 19:10, 33-34; 24:22). Hence to speak of the common good throughout these accounts only makes sense if "common" is limited to "common to Israel."

Within this restriction, however, in the covenantal laws and the prophetic writings one finds much concern for the common good. John J. Collins summarizes the general principles expressing this concern in the laws as follows: "On the one hand, they place restrictions on the aggrandisement of

---

[5] I am grateful to my colleague Tim Crawford for helping me think through some of the examples in this and the following paragraphs.

individuals and on the other they provide protection for the weaker members of the society."[6] Perhaps the most striking feature is the sabbatical laws, which show special concern for the poor, slaves, and even animals (e.g. Exod 23:10-13). Along with these are laws designed to protect debtors (e.g. Lev 25:35-37; Deut 24:10-13) and to prevent the poor from having to sell themselves into slavery (e.g. Lev 25:39-46). Laws requiring gleanings to be left for the poor and aliens are also notable (e.g. Lev 19:9-10), as are general injunctions against favoritism in dispensing justice (e.g. Lev 19:15). Along with the covenantal laws, the prophets' concern for justice and proper treatement of the poor is well-known. Nathan and Elijah both go so far as to attack Israelite kings, viz. David and Ahab, for their seizures of what did not belong to them (2 Sam 11-12; 1 Kings 21). Prophets like Amos rail against those who pervert justice and trample on the poor (Amos 5).

Besides this focus on the common good of the people of Israel, there are a few places in the Old Testament where a broader conception of the common good—including those outside of Israelite society—is envisioned. While these places are exceptional in terms of the overall Old Testament perspective, it is nonetheless significant that they are included in the canon. The book of Jonah is the most well-known, clearly demonstrating that Yahweh cares not only for the Ninevites—the very enemy of Israel—but even for their cattle (see esp. 4:11). Other prophetic books provide eschatological visions where all peoples live in peace with one another. Micah 4:1-4 probably has the brightest outlook:

> In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

[6] John J. Collins, "The Biblical Vision of the Common Good," in *The Common Good and U.S. Capitalism* (ed. Oliver F. Williams and John W. Houck; New York: University Press of America, 1987), 50-69, here 58. Collins's article is the only work I am aware of that so directly addresses the question of concern here. However, while his analysis of the covenantal laws is insightful, overall the article's vision is lacking, especially as it almost completely ignores the New Testament.

Similar visions can be found in such places as Isaiah 11, Isaiah 25, and Zechariah 14. It is true that even in these visions the concern for the good of outsiders is more or less dependent on the achievement of the good of Israel. This is also the case in the famous admonition of Jeremiah for the exiles in Babylon to "seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives" (Jer 29:7, KJV). Jonah is probably the only place where the good of outsiders is considered apart from any direct tie to that of Israel. Nonetheless, it is significant that in these other passages Israel's good is perceived to be accomplished in conjunction with the good of outsiders, rather than at the expense of it.

A final point regarding the idea of the common good in the Old Testament has to do with the "good" half of the phrase. It must be noted that to speak of the common good in the Old Testament requires a careful definition of "good" in the same way that "common" does. "Good" can only be understood as "obedience and faithfulness to the God of Israel." This definition is more expansive than it may initially sound, because obedience and faithfulness to Yahweh clearly require a strong sense of justice and social obligation, as we have already seen. We may add here the frequently noted point that six of the Ten Commandments treat relationships among humans in community with one another, whereas only four treat direct relations to God. Nonetheless, any attempt by any figure in the Old Testament to seek any kind of common good that in any way conflicts with strict obedience to Yahweh is condemned. This is most evident when examining the treatment of the rulers in the period of the kingdoms. Undoubtedly rulers like Solomon and Ahab thought they were making strategic alliances in marrying foreign wives, alliances that would work to the benefit of Israel and hence to the common good, but of course their condemnation in these affairs is well known. Omri was known by outsiders as one of the ablest and most successful kings of Israel, but in the biblical account he receives little note besides the evil he caused Israel to do in worshiping idols (1 Kings 16:25-28). It probably seemed a practical good to David to take a census of his people (2 Sam 24), and also to Ahaz of Judah to seek Assyrian help against invaders (2 Kings 16; Isa 7-8). Many of the kings of Israel and Judah no doubt thought they were being religiously tolerant and inclusive by allowing the worship of Baal and Asherah,

and even by allowing unsanctioned worship of Israel's God at the high places. But such good-seeking practicality and tolerance are always condemned by the biblical writers. Faithfulness to Yahweh is ultimately the only sort of good that matters.

Second Temple Judaism

It is surely no coincidence that the Old Testament writings that show the most interest in the good of non-Israelites are among the last writings in the Old Testament to be written. The experiences of the exile and diaspora brought the former Israelites into more serious engagement with the wider world and hence, at times, to a more widespread concern for a common good with a broader notion of common than one finds in the Pentateuch or historical books. By no means was such a response uniform. Indeed, concomitant with the rise of Judaism in the post-exilic period was the inward turn, where Jews frequently tried to keep themselves as free from outside influence as possible. The isolationism of the Qumran community by the Dead Sea is one culmination of this trend to remain pure by avoiding outsiders—in this case, even other Jews—at any cost.

Particularly with the growing cultural dominance of Hellenism from the third century BC to the first century AD, one finds a variety of Jewish attitudes and responses toward the outside world and foreign ideas. The resistance trend continues, of course. 3 Maccabees is one example where we continue to see the idea that Jews must resist becoming contaminated by outsiders, in this case the influence of Hellenism on Jews living in Alexandria. Yet we also see a much more positive engagement with Hellenism on the part of other Jews. A number of Jewish thinkers began to interpret their own religion in terms of Hellenistic concepts, and, more importantly for our purposes, to think of Judaism as a positive benefit to humanity as a whole. One key way in which this was done was to reinterpret stories from the Jewish past, especially the accounts of central Jewish figures, in a way that emphasized less their Jewish particularity and more their universal appeal. Demonstrating their positive contributions to human culture conceived broadly was a common part of this. To give a few examples, Pseudo-

Eupolemus, a second century BC Jewish historian, credits Abraham with inventing astrology and science and teaching them to the Phoenicians and Egyptians.[7] Artapanus, a second or third century BC Jewish historian, credits Moses with even greater accomplishments:

> This Moses became the teacher of Orpheus. When he reached manhood, he bestowed on humanity many useful contributions, for he invented ships, machines for lifting stones, Egyptian weapons, devices for drawing water and fighting, and philosophy.[8]

The better known Jewish historian Josephus, of the first century AD, similarly credits Solomon with passing on various methods of healing to be used for the benefit of humans in general (*Antiquities* 8.45-46).

We thus see in the second temple period a greater concern on the part of many Jews for the common good, with both "common" and "good" having broader application than we generally see in the Old Testament itself. In the Roman period an important note to add here is the twice-daily sacrifice offered in the Jerusalem temple on behalf of both the emperor and the Roman people as a whole (according to Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.197). While no doubt not every Jew sincerely felt the sentiment behind this sacrifice (it is tempting here to think of the rabbi's blessing on the tsar from *Fiddler on the Roof*), it is at the least a public expression of a concern for a very broadly conceived common good.

Apocalyptic Judaism and Christianity

With the coming of Christianity, however, we are confronted with a problem, for early Christianity is heavily embedded in the apocalyptic strand of Jewish thought. Of the various forms of Judaism that arose in the second temple period, the apocalyptic form was probably the *least* open to the notion of the common good. The Qumran community mentioned earlier, for instance, was highly apocalyptic in its thinking, as attested by the Dead Sea Scrolls produced by the community.

---

[7] See Carl R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors Volume 1: Historians* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 171-175.
[8] Holladay, *Fragments*, 209.

Apocalyptic thought presents two major obstacles for the notion of the common good. First, it is utterly pessimistic in regard to the possibility of goodness in the present age. The basic belief in the apocalyptic outlook is the idea that all of history is divided into two ages. The first age, consisting of past, present, and the immediate future, is an age dominated by the forces of evil. The second age, the future age, will begin when God intervenes radically in the world to destroy the forces of evil and to bring about a time of goodness, a return to the perfection that was God's original purpose in creation. Such a division of history means that the idea of a world marked by goodness is really not achievable apart from the direct intervention of God, so that acting for the common good in the present is scarcely a possibility. Apocalyptic thinkers generally held, in fact, that the world was going to get much worse in the period leading up to God's bringing about the new age. Since most apocalyptic thinkers thought that the new age was coming soon, there was even less hope for achieving any sort of common good in the present.

The second obstacle is that apocalyptic thinkers distinguished sharply between those who are on God's side and those who are not. In the Qumran *War Scroll* (1QM), for instance, there are the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness," with the latter group being annihilated during the eschatological battle. Moreover, as is certainly the case in the *War Scroll*, the number of those on God's side is always seen as being far smaller than the number of those who are not. With humanity divided so sharply and so unevenly, it is easy to see that when speaking of the common good, imagining anything other than a very narrow "common" would be quite difficult.

The roots of early Christianity are firmly planted in the soil of apocalyptic Jewish thinking. From John the Baptist to Jesus himself, and then to Paul and the other shapers of early Christianity, apocalyptic ideas pervade Christian teaching. Christian apocalyptic thought, however, undergoes a number of transformations that, I argue, ultimately remove these obstacles to and even demand a concern for the common good.

In addressing the obstacle of pessimism toward the possibility of goodness in the present age, the key change is that Jesus and the first Christians proclaimed the new age *already to have begun*. The Gospel of Mark summarizes Jesus' basic proclamation as beginning with "the kingdom of God has drawn near," or "is at hand," as the KJV more picturesquely puts it (Mark 1:15). The "kingdom of God" is Jesus' common expression for the new age. Jesus at another point stresses the idea that the kingdom has already arrived in even stronger terms (Luke 17:20b-21, NRSV):

> The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.

This is not to say that Jesus preached that everybody in his time was already living in the complete bliss of the new age. There was still a strong futuristic component to the kingdom in his teaching, as the numerous passages dealing with God's future judgment attest, as well as the places where Jesus provides an outline of what will happen at the true end of the present age (e.g. Mark 13).

We see a similar dialectic in Paul of the new age being both somehow present but not yet fully so. Paul refers to Christians as "those upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). Christ's death was specifically for the purpose of delivering us "from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4). "The form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), Paul says, and so Christians must live transformed lives not conformed "to this age" (Rom 12:2).[9] Yet the new age is no more fully present for Paul than it was for Jesus. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully" (1 Cor 13:12). We experience the new age presently through the "first fruits of the Spirit," but we and the rest of creation "groan in ourselves" as we eagerly await the new age's consummation (Rom 8:23).

In addressing the second obstacle to the common good, that of a sharply divided humanity, where only a small number are actually on God's side, Christians proclaimed early on that the Gospel was for all nations and that Jesus himself had begun the movement to make the insider/outsider

---

[9] Whoever began the tradition of translating τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ into English as "this world" rather than "this age" deserves at least a few extra seconds in purgatory. The tradition goes back at least to the KJV.

distinction a matter of pure faith rather then being along ethnic or sub-ethnic lines. In Luke's Gospel we are told that at Jesus' dedication as an infant, it is prophesied of him that he will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32). Luke also shows Jesus in his first public address speaking of his outreach to Gentiles (4:16-30). All the Gospels have moments where Jesus ministers to Gentiles or speaks of God's acceptance of them (e.g. Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 7:1-10; John 3:16). It is not until Jesus is raised from the dead, however, that Jesus himself actually proclaims that the gospel is to be taken to all nations (Matt 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-48). For the earliest Christians, it was primarily the gift of the Holy Spirit that led to the conclusion that Gentiles could be saved along with Jews (Acts 10–11; cf. Gal 3:1-5). At Pentecost, Peter explained the outpouring of the Spirit as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that at the eschaton God's Spirit would be given to "all flesh" (Acts 2:14-21; Joel 3:1-5). Ephesians sums up this point by asserting that God's very purpose in sending Christ was to break down the barrier of hostility that separated Jews and Gentiles, to "create in himself one new humanity in place of the two," and to "reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (Eph 2:14-16, NRSV).

This is not to say that the barrier between insiders and outsiders is abolished in early Christianity. Jesus spoke often of the certainty of God's coming judgment and of the danger of being on the negative side of that judgment. Paul and the other New Testament authors likewise spoke of God's wrath and of the eschatological destruction awaiting many (e.g. Rom 5:9; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Col 3:6; James 5:1-6; 2 Peter 2). The basic apocalyptic scenario of condemnation for the wicked and reward for the righteous is maintained. The difference is that a much greater possibility is given for all peoples to be considered a part of the righteous group, including those historically considered to be among Israel's—and therefore God's—enemies.

Hence the modified Christian apocalyptic thinking made it much more possible both to think of goodness being achieved prior to God's final dealing with humanity and to allow that such goodness might be achieved on a widespread basis, rather than being the exclusive property of a small subset of

humanity. Despite Christianity's roots in the most exclusive tradition of Jewish thought in the time period, the earliest Christian proclamation was conceived in such a way that we can legitimately think of concern for the common good—truly common and truly good—being a significant aspect of the Christian message.

The Kingdom of God and the Common Good

It is this notion of the already-if-only-incipiently-present kingdom of God, I suggest, that must be the starting place for a biblical conception of the common good. Jesus' parable of the mustard seed is an excellent illustration of seeing the kingdom this way (Matt 13:31b-32, NRSV):

> The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

The reference to the great size of the tree and the image of the "birds of the air" coming seem designed to emphasize the expansive nature of the kingdom's reach. The parable alludes to a messianic-eschatological vision from Ezek 17:22-24, where God takes a sprig from the top of a tree and plants it. The growth of the sprig is described even more expansively than that of the mustard seed in Jesus' parable: "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek 17:23b-24a). The kingdom is meant to be a haven where all of God's creatures take their rest, where God's goodness is experienced by all and in common with one another.

It is because of the presence of the Holy Spirit that we can say that the kingdom is present now. We saw briefly above that Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the "first fruits" of the new age (Rom 8:23). This means, of course, that the Spirit is likewise the beginning of the kingdom. But additionally, we must also note that for Paul, the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the place where God's Spirit resides (1 Cor 3:16-17):

> Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you? If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy that person. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple.

The “you” in this passage is plural in Greek, and the context makes it clear that Paul is talking about the church, not the individual. When these connections are considered together, the conclusion is easy to draw: The church itself is the place where God’s kingdom is breaking into the world, because of the dwelling and action of the Holy Spirit in the church (see also Eph 2:19-22).

There is yet another connection to consider. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ primary teaching about the Spirit—really the only large block of teaching on the Spirit in the Gospels—is that the Spirit will take Jesus’ own place after Jesus leaves. As John 14:26 says (NRSV):

> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

Later Jesus says that the Spirit “will take from what is mine and announce it to you” (16:14). Hence a key part of the Spirit’s ongoing work is to teach the teaching of Jesus. In terms of the kingdom, then, this means that the church’s role of enacting God’s in-breaking kingdom involves being faithful to Jesus’ teaching.[10] This should not be surprising. Jesus’ largest block of teaching on the kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount, ends with the illustration of the wise builder who built on the rock as compared to the foolish builder who built on the sand (Matt 7:24-27). The very point of the illustration is that those who do not act on the teaching of Jesus are like the foolish builder, and that those who do act on his teaching are like the wise builder. The kingdom involves putting Jesus’ teaching into practice.

It is not hard to find specific teachings of Jesus that relate to the idea of the common good. Matthew 25:31-46 provides Jesus’ most extended description of the last judgment. Here “all the nations” are gathered before Jesus and are judged according to one simple criterion: their treatment of the “least of these” (vv. 40, 45). In other words, God’s basic expectation for human beings—no religious qualification for “all the nations” is given—is that they will provide basic care for the lowest-rung

---

[10] An excellent fairly recent book that focuses on the centrality of keeping Jesus’ teaching as a part of the enactment of the kingdom, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, is Glen Stassen’s and David Gushee’s *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

members of society, thus that there will be a reasonable bottom standard for the common good.[11] In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to his disciples as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-14). Jesus' own purpose for his followers is not simply that they will live differently than the rest of the world, but that they will act in a way that benefits the world and serves as an example for the world. This idea fits quite well the conception of the church as the breaking-in point for the kingdom of God. While the kingdom itself is a supernatural entity, empowered by God's Spirit, the kingdom is not achieved apart from the actions of the disciples of Jesus. It is, after all, the disciples who constitute the church, and hence the kingdom will only be visible as it is manifested in concrete actions of the disciples.

There are naturally teachings of Jesus that are more direct and practical than these. Jesus' reply to the scribe who asks what is the greatest commandment is well known: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31). In Luke's Gospel, when discussing these two commandments (10:25-28), Jesus tacks on the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37), with the very point being that we must expand rather than limit whom we consider to be our neighbor. In the Sermon on the Mount, the command to love is extended even to enemies (Matt 5:44). The Golden Rule (Matt 7:12) needs hardly to be mentioned here. Could the point be clearer? We are to seek the common good with the broadest notion of common possible.

We see the same points in Paul's letters and elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul states that all the laws are fulfilled in the command to love one's neighbor, probably the closest parallel one can find between the teachings of Paul and Jesus. In 1 Thess 5:15 Paul enjoins his readers to "always seek the good for one another and for all people," a point similarly commanded in Gal 6:10. Romans 12:17b-18 is also along these lines: "Consider what is good before all people; to the extent that you can, live peacefully with all people." 1 Peter 2:13-17 brings the role of government into the picture,

[11] I am relying on the traditional interpretation of this passage. An alternate possibility is that the mention of "brothers" (ἀδελφοί) in v. 40 means that the judgment of the "nations" (= Gentiles) is specifically based on their treatment of Christians. See Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 356-360, for such an interpretation.

asserting that it is the job of both the emperor and local authorities to punish evildoers and reward good-doers (Gk *agathopoioi*, v. 14). Christians are expected to be among the good-doers and, moreover, to "honor all people" (v. 17). While to a certain extent such behavior may have to do with the desire of first century Christians as a minority group to survive in a potentially hostile religious environment, it is difficult to imagine that such good-seeking is not also intended to be a part of the "ministry of reconciliation" entrusted to Christians by God, a part of the work in Christ through which God is reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19). It is part of our work as God's ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20)—thus a part of the expansion of God's kingdom in the world.

This understanding of the place of the common good in relationship to the kingdom of God is not without its problems. The biggest problem goes back to the issue of the definition of "good." Paul's admonition to "consider what is good before all people" (Rom 12:17b) assumes a basic continuity in the understanding of goodness among the different parties involved. 1 Peter's instruction to be among the good-doers that will be rewarded by governments assumes that Christians and governments have compatible notions of goodness, too. What happens if Christians and outsiders have fundamental differences over what is considered good? The idea I have been presenting is that Christians' notion of the common good must be based in our commitment to God's kingdom, in our role in enacting the kingdom. The problem is that the kingdom itself will not be considered good by many, in fact will be considered just the opposite.

We see this problem within the Bible itself. We saw that in the Old Testament one of the basic problems of speaking about the common good was that the notion of "the good" was so strongly tied to strict obedience to God. Actions that some rulers undoubtedly considered to be oriented toward the common good are condemned by the biblical writers. In the New Testament, we see the problem illustrated in the book of Revelation. Unlike in Romans and 1 Peter, no continuity in the understanding of goodness by Christians and outsiders is assumed—it is instead just the opposite. Outsiders' understanding of goodness is held to be so at odds with God's perspective that there is essentially no

hope for them. The fundamentally idolatrous commitments of the world are irredeemable, just as Ahab and Jezebel in the Old Testament were irredeemable. Revelation's solution is simply judgment and re-creation.

How then must Christians respond when the world's conception of the good is not good? Or particularly when it is what we would indeed call evil? The issue of our relationship to the state presents an especially difficult case. Romans 13 urges Christians to submit to governments on the basis that all authorities have been established by God (v. 1), and because "rulers are not a cause for fear to good conduct but to bad" (v. 3a). Christians can be expected to be rewarded when we "do good," because the government is "God's servant to you for the good" (vv. 3b-4a).[12] This instruction once again assumes a common notion of what "the good" is. But in fact, how is it possible for governments to know what is good and thus be God's servants for it? The situation with governments is especially pressing precisely because of the command to submit to them. This situation, however, is only an instance of the larger problem of trying to define goodness, and of the inevitable conflicts that Christians will have with non-Christians over the definition (not to mention among ourselves).

Another problem we see here is the problem of defining "common." Governments are notoriously narrow in the "common" good that they work for. If the fundamental call of Christians is to work for the good of the most common of commons, how do we respond (even submit) to governments that tend to seek the good of their own particular "common" at the expense of everyone else? More broadly, how do we negotiate seeking the good of our immediate communities vis-à-vis seeking the good of those with whom, while mass media makes us keenly aware of their existence, we really have little to do? One naturally thinks of problems today like immigration policy, where concerns for the safety of our own nation-common is pitted against our desire to receive "the homeless, tempest-tost," the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." We should not think such questions are easy. Jesus himself

---

[12] θεοῦ γὰρ διάκονός ἐστιν σοὶ εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν (4a). Many translations miss the nuance here by translating this as, e.g., "God's servant for *your* good" (NRSV, italics added) or "God's servant to help you" (NCV). The σοί clearly goes with διάκονός, not with τὸ ἀγαθόν. The conception of "good" here is a common one, not a special help aimed at Christians.

resisted helping the Canaanite woman on the grounds that he was sent only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). We have seen that the common good with which the Old Testament is mostly concerned is only that of the Israelites themselves.

While there is no simple solution to such problems, the problems themselves suggest a crucial aspect of the Christian contribution to the common good. Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most basic, contribution Christians must make to the common good is to bear witness to the kingdom of God. If, as I have argued, it is through the spread of the kingdom that the truly common good is ultimately achieved, then we must be about the proclamation and enactment of the kingdom in the same way that Jesus and the first disciples were. For it is in doing so that we demonstrate the very definition of the good that is to be common to all.