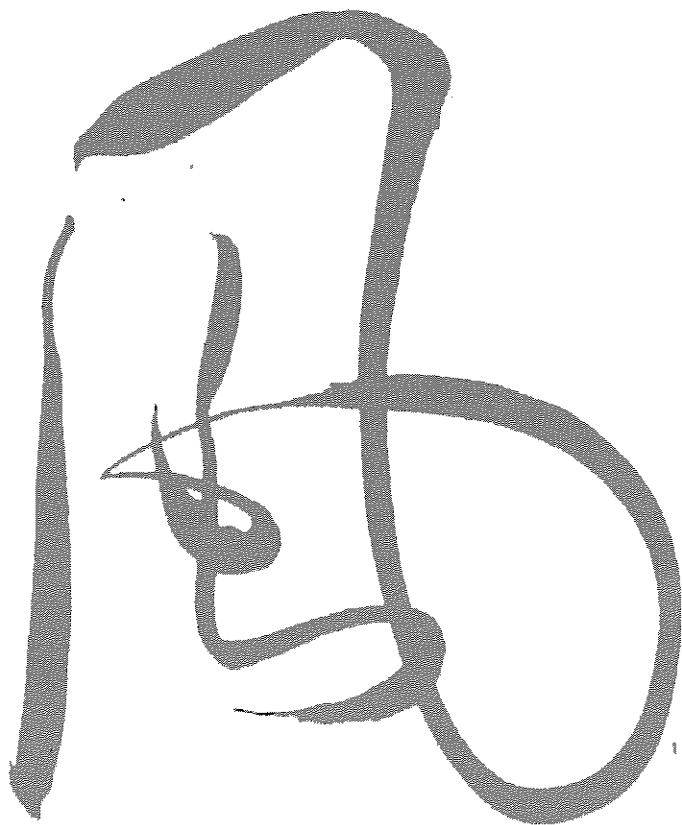


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ESSAY REVIEW: Gregory A. Boyd's *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*¹

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With his latest book *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*, Greg Boyd calls upon the North American Christian community to sever its ties with either right-wing or left-wing political allies and to return to the radical counter-culture lifestyle and values espoused by its founder Jesus Christ. Boyd, is perhaps best known for his views on the Openness of God and Trinitarian Spiritual Warfare (*Is God to Blame*, IVP 2003, *God of the Possible*, Baker 2000, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, IVP 2001, *God at War*, IVP 1997.)

Initially, one may question the relevance of this work for the largely Asian audience who reads this Journal. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the more fundamental arguments presented here should not only be of interest to the Asian world, but they are perhaps, in fact worthy of immediate implementation. Boyd's central thesis is that a significant portion of American Evangelicalism is guilty of nationalistic and political idolatry (11). He recounts how in 2004 when he refused to allow his St. Paul, MN suburban church to be a venue for right-wing political stumping or any form of political debate, a significant number of his congregation grew irate. By the conclusion of a multi-week sermon series entitled the "Cross and the Sword" (which subsequently became the basis for this current work), approximately one thousand of his five thousand member congregation had left the Church.

1. The North American Political Scene

Boyd contends that rather than placing its central focus upon Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God's kingdom, the American church has become entrenched in a quagmire of political debates, agendas and issues (11). The practical results of this division is most often seen in the Christian community debating and defining "Christian" positions on matters such as, public prayer in schools, homosexual marriage, abortion, maintaining and defending a "Christian" culture in America, and a host of other issues related to the triumph of the Christian faith over those who would undermine its place in American society. In democratically structured representative republics such as America, debates and positions on these matters result in interest groups aligning themselves with the particular political party that best or most consistently comes down on their side of the issue; for the more Conservative wing of the Evangelical Church this is typically the Republican Party. Thus, while Boyd's focus is more upon what he perceives to be the unhealthy alliance between the Conservative Evangelical Church and right-wing politics, his critique could just as easily apply to that sector of the Christian church that would tend to align itself with left-wing party politics. Boyd contends that the nationalistic myth of America as a Christian nation has several harmful effects. 1.) It blinds Americans to the way that some of their most basic and cherished cultural assumptions are in fact diametrically opposed to the kingdom way of life taught by Jesus and his disciples. 2.) Many pagan aspects of American culture become Christianized. 3.) Rather than Christianity being presented as a radical alternative way of life in Christ, American culture is presented by the church with a religious version of what it already is. 4.) More significantly still, Boyd argues that the linking of the kingdom of God with particular political stances has the effect of compromising the beauty of the kingdom to the non-Christian community. Thus, rather than being a witness of the love of Christ to the world, the Christian community often finds itself embroiled in battle with the world (p.13).

2. The Two Kingdoms

Boyd begins his argument by showing that the Kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God operate on premises that are polar opposites. The Kingdom of the world is described as the "kingdom of the sword" which exercises its authority by wielding "power over" its subjects. "Wherever a person or group exercises "power over" others – or tries to – there is a

¹ Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005. 207 pp., hardbound, ISBN 10: 0-310-26730-7, U.S. \$19.99.

version of the kingdom of the world" (18). Versions of the kingdom of the world, which are evident in many forms and largely distinguished by the level of involvement with which their subjects participate, all share the common distinction of exercising "power over" the people. Inherent in the DNA of the kingdom of the world is to defend or advance one's own people-group, nation, ethnicity, state, religion, ideology or political agenda. Thus we see perpetual conflict within the kingdom of the world (47). Despite the various efforts that differing versions of the kingdom of the world use to try to influence or modify ideas or behavior, "power over" or "power of the sword" ultimately is the ability to "coerce behavior by threats and to make good on those threats when necessary" (18). Using Romans 13 as his premise, Boyd argues that "power over" or kingdoms of the world are not necessarily all bad. Christians are to thus honor, obey and pray for their governing officials. Following the work of John Howard Yoder with respect to Romans 13, Boyd makes clear that worldly governments are not "created" by God nor are they specifically morally approved by God. Rather, "power over" governments are the means God has instituted to preserve and maintain as much law and order as possible among a fallen human race and some "power over" governments do this better than others. Consistent with his views on Trinitarian Spiritual Warfare, Boyd argues that God's cosmic spiritual enemy Satan is ever at work to influence governments to accomplish evil. Taking Lk. 4:5-7 at face value and bolstering support from a wide range of New Testament passages, Boyd argues that at this time Satan "now owns the authority of all versions of the kingdom of the world and gives this authority to whomever he pleases" (21). In stark contrast to the kingdom of the world which grows by means of "power over," the kingdom of God as manifest in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ is one which is characterized as a "power under" kingdom. It is by lovingly placing ourselves under others, in service to others and with the self-sacrificing love displayed by Jesus that the kingdom of God advances. Boyd designates this as "lamb power" rather than "lion power" (31). God's agenda then, in Boyd's view, is not merely to get individuals to repeat a sinner's prayer or to subscribe to a set of beliefs rather; it is to gather a community who individually and collectively embody Christ, thus manifesting his life of sacrificial love "power under" to the world. "Participants in the kingdom of the world trust the power of the sword to control behavior; participants of the kingdom of God trust the power of self-sacrificial love to transform hearts" (32). As fleshed out on earth, "power under" living looks and acts markedly different than the results of "power over" living. While in all versions of the kingdom of the world

dominance, subversive control and capitalistic material gain are viewed as signs of winning or accomplishment, "power under" tactics may even look like outright foolishness. Boyd asks, "What would happen if the ultimate criteria we used to assess how "successful" or "unsuccessful" our churches were was the question, *are we loving as Jesus loved* (45)? Boyd argues that because the kingdom of the world is not and can never be the kingdom of God, it is imperative that people do not confuse the two. "A nation may have noble ideals and be committed to just principles, but it is not for this reason Christian" (54). Furthermore, the kingdom of God is not an ideal version of the kingdom of the world nor can the kingdom of the world aspire to be the kingdom of God. God's kingdom looks like Jesus, and no amount of sword wielding, however just it may be, can ever get a person, government, nation, or world closer to that" (55). Boyd argues that given the highly politicized nature of the world in which Jesus lived, and the ample opportunities that were presented to him by both his disciples and the crowd at large, it is nothing short of amazing that Jesus consistently refused to engage in the politics of his day or to comment upon the government structure he lived under. Jesus instructed his disciples to live out "power under" principles despite the oppressive nature of the government under which they lived. In fact it was his unwillingness to overthrow the kingdom of the world, by kingdom of the world tactics that ultimately resulted in the crowds turning against him. "Jesus would simply not allow the world to set the terms of his engagement with the world" (62). Thus, Jesus' band of disciples included both Matthew, the right-wing tax collector, and Simon the left-wing zealot (62). Boyd contends that the history of the Christian church is one which reveals a consistent lack of trust in the radical tactics that Jesus advocated. From the Constantinian shift and Augustine's officially marrying the Church with the sword against the Donatists, historically the Christian church has largely employed the same "power over" triumphalistic tactics that characterize the kingdom of the world. "In the name of the one who taught us not to lord it over others but rather to serve them [Mt. 20:25-28], the church often lorded over others with a vengeance as ruthless as any version of the kingdom of the world ever has" (81).

3. The Myth of A Christian Nation

Approximately midway through this book Boyd turns to discuss two prominent issues within the North American Christian church: The ever prominent slogan that the Christian church must "take America back for

God” and the more fundamental idea of the myth of a Christian nation. With the first issue Boyd laments the fusion of American patriotism with the kingdom of God as these are commonly presented as one and the same. The idea of taking America back for God is distilled by Boyd as the notion that the sizable American Christian population has the capacity to at least improve, if not dominate American government and culture (93). In response to this Boyd contends that at no time in the history of the world has Christian dominance resulted in positive marks for the Christian church. “When kingdom-of-God citizens aspire to acquire Caesar’s authority to accomplish ‘the good,’ we sell our kingdom birthright for a bowl of worldly porridge [Gen. 25:29-34].” Boyd argues further that it is in fact the democratic nature of the American government which invites participation in the running thereof that feeds the temptation to seize “power over.” “But as valuable as it is, kingdom-of-God citizens must consistently resist the temptation to identify our ability to influence government by voting or serving in governmental office as our distinct authority as kingdom [of God] people” (97). Boyd continues to argue against the common notion that America is or ever was a “Christian nation.” “. . . America as a nation has clearly never looked remotely like Jesus. There was nothing distinctively Christlike about the way America was “discovered,” conquered, or governed in the early years” (99). Boyd argues that it was deism and human reason, not Christian faith and the Bible, that largely steered the thinking of the American founding fathers and the subsequent documents that they produced. By being able to separate the kingdom of the world from the kingdom of God, Boyd says that we are more able to clearly see both the positive and negative aspects of American history without the added burden of having to somehow explain this history as “Christian.” Boyd believes that the propagation of the idea that America is Christian is harmful on many fronts. First, it is harmful to global missions to the extent that religious rhetoric continues to be employed with respect to America’s international dealings and the Christianization of American military force. In Boyd’s view the resulting American nationalism that is often disdained by other citizens of the world, becomes associated with Jesus Christ. “Far from invoking God’s name to justify the behavior of our nation (for example, to “blow [people] away in the name of the Lord”), we should in God’s name lead the charge in prophetically critiquing our nation. Indeed, following the example of Jesus (which is, after all, our sole calling), we should publicly side with all who have been or continue to be harmed by our nation” (111). Secondly, Boyd argues that it is not only global missions that is harmed by identifying America as a Christian nation, but the missionary work within

America is harmed as well. Failure to distinguish between the “quasi-Christian” civil religion of America results in two dangers. 1.) American citizens lose their missionary zeal because they believe that they live in a Christian nation. Boyd states that once the veneer of American civil religion is removed, “. . . we are arguably no less self-centered, unethical, or prone toward violence than most other cultures. . . .” We generally look no more like Jesus, dying on a cross out of love for the people who crucified him, than do people in other cultures . . .” (113). A further problem with the failure to distinguish civil religion from the kingdom of God, according to Boyd, is that much time and resources are spent “defending and tweaking the civil religion – as though doing so had some kingdom value” (114). Thirdly, accepting the idea that America is a Christian nation results in placing unwarranted and unjustified trust in “power over” tactics as opposed to the “power under” tactics displayed by Jesus Christ. “As a result, many Americans place exaggerated confidence in the ability of Christians to influence society by political means rather than by distinctly kingdom-of-God means” (117). One particularly significant consequence of this displaced trust is that the practice of prayer and its profound power are minimized. Likewise the consistent New Testament call for daily social action that mimics the Calvary quality of love displayed by Jesus Christ is diminished. The fourth harm that comes from American Christians viewing their nation as a Christian nation is that such a view results in American Christians seeing themselves as the moral guardians of the society in which they live. It is Boyd’s position that this in turn results in five fundamental problems. 1.) Being called to imitate Jesus, people must keep in mind that Jesus himself never assumed the position of moral guardian over anyone (128). 2.) Moral guardians place themselves in position as judges over others, while such a practice is forbidden by Christians in the New Testament (132). 3.) Assuming the role of moral guardian earns Christians the reputation of self-righteous judges rather than self-sacrificing servants (133). 4.) Charges of hypocrisy are both earned and deserved, by those who see themselves as moral judges (136). 5.) Throughout history the church has shown itself to be a very poor moral guardian (139). Finally, Boyd argues that the view of America as a Christian nation results in the inclination of kingdom people to view America as a theocracy (147). With this point Boyd compares and contrasts America with the Old Testament nation of Israel. Boyd argues that we have no biblical or empirical reason to believe that America ever was a theocratic nation - that God ever intended to be king over it in any unique sense (148). Boyd argues further that the New Testament teaches that the Old Testament theocratic system is in fact

finished. God's kingdom is a kingdom of people from every nation, every tribe and every tongue (152). Thus, American government is neither the "handmaiden of God," nor should it be relied upon to carry out the work that God has called the Church to do (153). The idea that America is a theocracy or a "nation under God" also results in American Christians wrongly presuming that all Americans share the same basic Christian presuppositions. Thus evangelistic endeavors, rather than being approached as true cross cultural experiences (kingdom-of-God people interacting with kingdom-of-the world people), are viewed and approached as same culture dialogues. Developing Boyd's thought further, one could rightly ask the question, "what right does a kingdom-of-God person have to believe that kingdom-of-the world people would believe or act any differently than they do?" How in fact by enacting legislation using "power over" tactics could one ever expect to believe that the internal transformation goals of the kingdom-of-God could be accomplished?

Astute readers of this provocative work will anticipate early that Boyd's development of "power under" versus "power over" tactics will have strong implications for one's view of violence and warfare. Boyd does not disappoint us in that the final chapter of this work is spent delving into these issues by means of a "public wrestling" with what he describes as five of the most frequently asked questions on Christians and violence. Here Boyd develops his answers to these questions essentially from the view of Christian Pacifism. To the following questions: What about Self-defense? What about Christians in the Military? Haven't Some Wars Resulted in Good Things? Don't Your Ideas Lead to Passivity? And Don't We Best Serve the Oppressed by Overthrowing Their Oppressors? Boyd gives a fair and even-handed treatment of the subject. While Boyd consistently comes down on the side of non-violence with respect to these issues, it should not be concluded that he advocates a position of non-activity. Both intercessory prayer and corporate and individual acts of self-sacrificing love are advocated as the under utilized and under estimated weapons of kingdom-of-God people. Notwithstanding the fact that at least on the North American Pentecostal scene, a theology of non-violence has largely been abandoned for the same pro-military, pro-nationalistic ideas Boyd is arguing against here; Pentecostal readers who recall that their own early heritage is rooted in pacifism may be especially interested to find that biblically supported and theologically sound arguments for non-violence can be made from theologians like Boyd for whom the label "liberal" will not stick.

For the sake of emphasis this reviewer has purposefully chosen to pause here at the end of this review and to clarify some salient points concerning what Boyd is and is not saying in this book. It is important to keep in mind that while it is from the American context that Boyd writes, and thus his critique centers largely upon America, Boyd is not saying that America or democracy is necessarily bad. In fact, perhaps more to the point, Boyd's contentions throughout the work have more to do with the American church than with America as a nation. It is the church, which based upon the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, that has misaligned its allegiances with the end result being nationalistic civil religion. He is however, clearly pointing out that neither America as a country, nor democracy as a system of government, are necessarily God's chosen or preferred entities – neither are in any way synonymous with the kingdom of God. "Our allegiance, therefore, can never be to any version of the kingdom-of-the-world, however much better we may think it is than other versions of the kingdom-of-the-world" (71). Boyd argues that kingdom-of-God citizens are always to have a healthy suspicion toward every version of the kingdom-of-the-world, especially our own (89). "... America has arguably now become, by historic and global standards, a relatively good version of the kingdom of the world. Still, we must never confuse the positive things that America does with the kingdom of the God, for the kingdom of God is not centered on being morally, politically, or socially positive *relative* to other versions of the kingdom of the world" (103). Clearly, the issue for Boyd is not - "Is America a good nation or not?" The issue is that neither America nor any other nation on earth is the kingdom of God. Therefore, no amount of political or legislative action will advance the kingdom of God. While kingdom of God people may find that certain political or legislative actions may result in some individuals experiencing a more economically or socially comfortable life on earth, this should never be misconstrued as somehow being the product of the kingdom of God at work. Despite the strong demarcation that Boyd makes between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, he is not advocating any kind of religious separatism or isolation from the kingdom of the world by its citizens. Boyd does not argue that Christians should not be involved in politics if this is where they are being led. He likewise concedes that faith and moral convictions should inform one's voting record. Nonetheless, the ambiguities of living in the kingdom of the world result in inevitable compromises and complexities to the extent that individuals may indeed disagree as to the particular way in which their beliefs inform their participation within the kingdom of the world. Therefore, Christians should avoid branding political or legislative

options as either *Christian* or *non-Christian*. "Does this mean that evangelical Christians shouldn't speak out publicly on moral issues? Absolutely not! We should speak out, but with self-sacrificial actions more than with words..." Again, as citizens of a free country who are invited to give our opinions, we may enter the fray of conflicting political opinions as we see fit. But as public representatives of the kingdom of God, our confidence is to lie solely in God's promise to build his kingdom through Jesus' Spirit at work in and through us (141).

4. Evaluation and Application

This is a very readable and thought provoking book. If this reviewer could secure permission to exercise "power over" all his clergy friends, students and teaching colleagues, he would *force* them to take a couple of hours and read this work. Clearly, Boyd's ideas will (and already have) caused controversy and debate among those in the Conservative Christian community. From the standpoint of Historical theology, Boyd is far removed from the magisterial reformers Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. While his ideas - especially those on non-violence - seem to more closely align him with the Anabaptist camp, even here he is not a perfect fit. His views on Christian participation in government such as, Christians may serve in government, those who are privileged to should vote, Christians should be actively engaged in society with non-Christians, are outside the bounds of typical Anabaptist sentiment. It would be my hope that Christians from all nations would read this work and simply substitute their own country or political structure for the words America or democracy. Already in America the political machine is revving up for the 2008 presidential elections. A scan of the headlines of the newspapers in the Philippines shows that there too, Christian action groups are mobilizing to place their candidates front and center in preparation for their country's upcoming elections. While the positions that Boyd develops in this work may not convince every reader, fair minded thinkers, regardless of their country of origin or the political system under which they live, will at the very least find themselves challenged to rethink, perhaps restructure or more hopefully abandon their defense of the nationalistic allegiances, confidence in kingdom of the world political machinery and "power over" tactics that seem to increasingly be defining the way the Christian church at large is operating. As one whose own theological pilgrimage has taken some interesting twists and turns over the last several years, this reviewer finds himself with great sympathy for the ideas that Boyd puts forth in this work. If there is any uneasiness

with me, it is the sober recognition that while the theory presented here is quite easy to grasp, its implications and implementation will require a significant and at times unpleasant departure from what have for too long become the traditional and socially accepted norms of what it means to live as a Christian.