A Response to John W. Seaman, "Moderating the Christian Passion for Politics"[1]

John S. H. Bonham

I appreciate the statements John Seaman made in his article as to his purpose and scope, limiting it so that the article could be precise and helpful. But I was left at the end of the article with a question raised in the second paragraph still unanswered, namely, is not politics different from government? Seaman does not define either and seems to use the word politics when he means government. True, politicians form governments, but the nature of politics and the nature of government are distinct. His concluding sentence to the second paragraph is typical [p.3]:

> This distinctive characteristic of political authority, the enforcement of commands by the use of the sword, makes Christian involvement in politics problematical in a way that involvement in other aspects of social life is not.

It is not political authority that has the power of the sword but government.

This point leads to the next major concern I have with his article. He does not distinguish between Christian personal ethics and state ethics, a very common error amongst Christians. A Christian in government (whether in the legislative, judicial or executive branch) who makes decisions symbolized by the sword (*i.e.*, decisions that limit the rights and freedoms of other humans, up to and including the decision of life and death) does not do so as an individual, nor as a politician, but as an empowered representative of the government, acting on behalf of the whole society. As an individual he/she would not have such power over another human, nor the right to take life, but the necessity to turn the other cheek if an offence has occurred. As a representative of the state such a person would have the obligation to exercise power over another human and would be delinquent in duty by turning the other cheek in response to an offence. Christ's teaching in the sermon on the mount applies to Christian disciples in their personal discipleship; it is not a statement of principles governing states and societies. Paul's point in Rom 13 regarding the sword indicates that states (governments) have the duty and the right to take away individuals' freedoms and even their lives. This is not vengeance but justice. But no individual person, Christian or non-Christian, has the right to mete out justice to another, and definitely not to seek vengeance. Personal ethics and duties need to be kept distinct from state ethics and duties.

I then take exception to his first main point: "Politics as a Necessary Evil" [p.3]. It seems to me that the classic Reformed concept is that

government is a creation ordinance and one of the three God-ordained institutions (home, church, state) that make life liveable. Because the entire human race has fallen in Adam, government is made up of sinners with all the effects of depravity, but that does not make government or politics a necessary evil. I do not feel that the Scriptures Seaman quotes support his assumption (for it is an assumption that he does not prove). His view puts a Christian into a negative posture from the beginning in any involvement in political or governmental life. He does not seem to relate government to the creation ordinance, which gives man authority over everything in the physical world, in order to bring it under rule.

God is the God of order and government is a form of order. It cannot be seen as a necessary evil. If there were no evil, would there still be government? I believe there would be, for the final eternal state to which we are moving as Christians is a kingdom! It will be ruled over by God's king, our Lord, the God-man!

Further, on the same issue, to make politics a "necessary" evil seems to deny the great biblical and Reformed doctrine of common grace. Common grace is certainly mediated to the whole of mankind by the good things that government brings and by the restraint that good government puts upon evil. I thank God for this common grace that even comes through unregenerate people!

Within the function of government there are "necessary" evils, features that in themselves are not good but are required because we live in a fallen world, *e.g.*, prisons, armies, war, capital punishment.

His third assertion, that we do not know God's political agenda, is something of a straw man. His illustrations merely prove the comprehensiveness of divine providence (a great truth not touched upon in his article). In his providence, God uses all the resources of the world he has made, even though it includes fallen man. Thus God mysteriously and wondrously uses evil people and even evil events (*e.g.*, the crucifixion) without compromising his own justice or goodness, while holding all the humans accountable. he will judge their wicked deeds, though in mercy he brought good out of their evil. None of this is dealt with under his third point, though it would seem to be related.

As to his fourth point, yes, Christians may be a harmful influence in politics. But the same is true for non-Christians! He is quite right that Christians may have spiritual pride in presuming they know the will of God and that their political agenda is ordained by God. But what about standing for true righteousness based on God's eternal moral code? What about distinguishing our cultural conditioning from the positive values taught in the Ten Commandments?

I think a careful description of what is truly involved in the separation of church and state would have helped the purpose of his article. In my mind it is clear that we must not separate Christians from politics or government, but we must always keep our gospel free from being joined to any specific

political topic or agenda. We must keep our churches, as churches, outside the political processes so as to be valid prophetic witnesses to the consciences of those within them.

---

[1]John W. Seaman's article appeared in *The Baptist Review of Theology*, 1, No.1 (Autumn 1991), 3-11.

John S. H. Bonham is the Regional Secretary of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Territories.

John W. Seaman

In his spirited response to my "Moderating the Christian Passion for Politics," John Bonham offers five main criticisms of the arguments I developed in that article.

His first criticism is that I use the word politics when I mean government, failing to appreciate that their natures are distinct and that it is government and not (as I claim in my article) political authority which has the "power of the sword." But the distinction between politics and government is simply not as sharp as Bonham alleges, for the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "political" —and this is a definition which political scientists would possibly refine but not fundamentally dispute—as "of or affecting the State or its government." Semantics aside, my point in the article was that the form of authority which I call "political" (and Bonham calls "government") is distinct from other forms of authority, such as the ruling authority in a family or Church or university, by virtue of its unique claim to exercise the power of the sword. This, I had further argued, makes it problematical for Christians in a way other forms of authority are not. I see nothing in Bonham's first criticism which should challenge me to change my view of this.

His second criticism is that I fail to distinguish between Christian personal ethics and state ethics. Bonham appears to trace this failure —"a very common error amongst Christians," he asserts— to not recognizing that Christ's teaching in the sermon on the mount applies to Christian disciples only in their "personal" discipleship and not to their actions when they are empowered representatives of the government. But I am not convinced that the sermon on the mount was intended to apply only to our "personal" discipleship, as Bonham supposes. First, there is no direct textual evidence to support his supposition. Moreover, what counts as "personal" varies from society to society and over time. Bonham's interpretation would make the application of Christ's teaching excessively dependent on prevailing cultural norms. Finally, Bonham's insistence on keeping personal ethics distinct

from state ethics raises troubling questions about what sort of state ethics Christians are suppose to follow if they become governmental representatives. Their own? The state's? Whose?

The third problem which Bonham finds in my article is with my view that politics is a "necessary evil," which seems to him to deny the Reformed doctrine that government is ordained by God, as well as the doctrine of common grace. He also appears concerned that my view cannot provide an adequate account of government in the final eternal state when we will be ruled by God's king, Jesus Christ. Bonham's criticisms here raise interesting and difficult issues, which, I believe, cannot be adequately answered in the short space available for this note. But I should at least say that when I spoke of politics as a "necessary evil" I meant human government (which is and must be characterized by the sword), not God's kingdom (which in its final eternal state does not, on my understanding, employ the sword). With that qualification in mind, I must admit that Bonham is right to detect that I do not relate human government to the "creation ordinance giving man authority over everything in the physical world." For I believe, rightly or wrongly, that although Gen 1:28 gives man dominion over many thing in the world, it does not establish man's rule over other human beings. Human government, that is, dominion of human beings, I see as having entered as a result of the Fall (Gen 3:16) and as having been provided by God because fallen man was incapable of lovingly following his will and could only be induced to live in some semblance of peace and order through fear of the (government's) sword. I see nothing here that denies the doctrine that government is ordained by God or that it was given to us by his grace. But possibly my argument might not have misled Bonham on these issues had I employed the somewhat more cumbersome yet more accurate expression "politics as a necessary instrument to combat evil" in my article rather than the glib expression "politics as a necessary evil."

Bonham's fourth criticism is that my demonstration that we do not know God's political agenda is a straw man. However, given the proclivity of both progressive and conservative Christians (and not just in recent years) of sanctifying their respective political agendas as those of God's, I hardly think my argument set up a straw man. He also claims that my argument on this issue did not touch upon the comprehensiveness and mercifulness of a divine providence who uses all resources in the world to bring good out of fallen man's evil. However, although I did not develop this theme as fully and eloquently as Bonham did in his response to my article, I did in fact touch upon it when I concluded my argument on the essential unknowability of God's political agenda by remarking on the "possibility that even in situations where the conditions of civil righteousness are visibly and indisputably violated, as they were in the case of Jesus' crucifixion, God may be operating to bring about some spiritual good."

His final criticism appears to be concerned with the possibility that my argument for moderating the Christian eagerness for involvement in politics

might unduly undermine a Christian willingness to stand up "for true righteousness based on God's eternal moral code." I share his concern, which is why I argued in the conclusion of my article that Christians could act as a "gadfly stinging the consciences" of their fellow citizens by rousing, persuading, and reproving them and that they have a "unique and positive contribution" to make in this respect.

John W. Seaman is Associate Professor of Political Science at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.