



Until God Reigns

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1st Corinthians 15:23-34

What do we expect out of our rulers, authorities, and leaders? We often speak of command, influence, guidance, policy, and direction. We may speak of character, ethics, and moral fiber. We expect leaders to chart a course, set the pace, and call others to obey rules, legislation, and codes of conduct. Do we expect the same from our religious leaders or from God? N.T. Wright raises similar issues in *When God Became King*¹ that we should consider. What does it mean for Jesus to reign? How should that impact our lives? As Jesus ostensibly did not come to earth with political aspirations, how do and should we consider the character of God's reign in our lives through Christ Jesus?

Absolute monarchs traditionally reign by fiat. They declare their will, which becomes the law of the realm. There is no question of oversight by some powerful authority. The monarch's will is law, regardless of criticism, support, direction, advice, or the counsel of others. Try as we might to cast Jesus' reign in such a light, the facts and stories of Jesus' life and ministry just do not add up like that.

We are perhaps more accustomed to a three-branched system of government with checks and balances. Yet we still seem to project a perspective of the executive office as the one wielding power and pushing through policies, programs, and personal interests. We look upon God as ruler, and often project something along the lines of God acting as Divine legislator, Executive enforcer of legal decrees, and Judge to convict and sentence those who fail to obey. We take all our pictures of human political governance and press God into the pattern of some patchwork of roles we understand. If there is any foundational authority, we point to the Bible as though it might somehow keep God in check.

The problem with this collage portraying God as ruler is that there really is no basis for such a construct in the teaching, example, action, and ministry of Jesus. Jesus only rarely refers to God in terms of judge. Jesus speaks of God's will, but scarcely in terms of legal requirements or a defined set of ordinances. Jesus hardly portrays God as the enforcer of legal requirements, exacting compliance of a people through the use of intimidation.

Jesus does not reduce following God, becoming a disciple, to legal prescriptions. Jesus speaks of service, obedience, and submission, but in terms of trust, confidence, assurance, and dependence. He speaks of new life, rebirth, bread, water, sustenance for living peace amid a life fraught with uncertainty. When he speaks of law, it is a wholly new kind of law; it is a relational law: "Love one another."

By contrast, we think of ruling according to codes of punishment. Paul speaks of ruling in terms of nurturing life. This is a completely new paradigm. Earthly models of ruling tend toward submission to the desires of authorities in order to avoid punishment and death. The model Paul sets forth is one in which any role for death is taken off the table as being contrary to God's will and purpose. Death is the archenemy of God's reign, the enemy Christ Jesus is in the process of deposing. The servant or tool of earthly political power works in opposition to God.

The contrast here could not be greater. Jesus does not wield death, threat, punishment, or fear as a weapon to complete, maintain, or expand his reign. Rather, Jesus' reign works to eliminate death and fear completely. They are not instruments of Jesus' reign at all. All authorities in opposition to Jesus

¹ Wright, N. T. *When God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. New York: Harper One, 2012.

are to find destruction, but not through death, so much as through the destruction of death itself and the grip of fear through which such power structures control their subjects.

We categorize God's will in terms of legal codes and miss the point. We think of rules, regulations, and requirements without recognizing that God is looking for something wholly different. Jesus did not speak to his disciples in the legal categories of Leviticus. He was not as focused in teaching external morality as a building block for a secure society. He was not engaged in establishing norms of conduct that could be translated into a codified system of regulations. Instead, he spoke of life, love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, acceptance, patience, compassion, release, and service.

Jesus did not establish parameters for the appropriate order of worship for gatherings of believers. He did not bother with procedures for church business forums or governance. He did not set rules for the election of officers, the maintenance or use of property, or even define the appropriate systematic rendering of doctrine and theology! He neither established a pattern of correct procedures, nor did he elaborate details of a rigid doctrinal orthodoxy. These were not Jesus' greater concerns with establishing God's reign on earth!

As one who has spent years equipping and teaching church leaders in theology, I have often wished that Jesus had answered many more of my questions much more directly. It would have made my job much easier, but that was not Jesus' purpose. Much more than having knowledge about God and finding the appropriate categories with which to talk and think about God, Jesus' purpose in teaching us about God's reign centered on knowing God. This cannot be accomplished by a system of rules, nor by a system of doctrinal definitions. Jesus' call to the reign of God was completely different: "Follow me."

Rather than a reign established on the basis of laws and regulations, this reign is based on the living example of God in Jesus Christ. It is about learning how to truly live. It is about living by a higher standard of fulfillment, enjoyment, justice, and confident peace. It is about submitting to a better way, expressing the best of what life can be, of sharing the attitude, priorities, and purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. God incarnate became human that we might live according the God's example.

This is a wholly different concept of governance. This is not God demanding that we act to appease and please God's whims. It is God calling us to rise to a higher plane of fulfillment. It is about God calling us to understand how to appreciate life, both our own experience and the contributions we can make for the benefit of others.

God reigns in Christ to raise us to a new category of living. It means the end of earthly systems of coercion, force, and control through fear. It places all of life in submission to this new impetus for living, one that focuses not on personal ambition and will, but on the benefit of all. It means allowing God's love, grace, and mercy to become incarnate in our lives. Even Jesus' own sovereignty is not about self-fulfillment or self-advancement, but about fellowship with these higher purposes of God.

If God's reign were about those issues of this world, Paul says the Christian faith is utterly foolish. There is too much pain, suffering, and discomfort in this existence to bring value to issues of self-assertion and self-advancement. Death by beasts in an arena does nothing for self-advancement.

In this reign of God, however, life is not lived for self. It is not coerced by fear of death or punishment. It is not about putting the self forward, finding greater importance than others. It is about placing God's purposes first, simply because they bring and foster life for ourselves and others. It is a higher calling and purpose. Are we prepared to lay aside our interests until God reigns fully in us?

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