NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PRESTON SPRINKLE

EXILES

THE CHURCH IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

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DAVID C COOK®

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Chapter 1

THE POLITICS OF CHURCH

Going to church is a politically subversive act. Or at least, it used to be.

Most people who hear the word *church* today think of a church building with a cross hanging on the front wall, Sunday services and sermons, worship bands, sharply dressed families, and cheap coffee served with powdered creamer (or, for the hipster megachurches, a Guatemalan dark roast with oat milk). But a first-century merchant in Corinth would have heard something very different. The original meaning of *church* was profoundly political.

The Greek word translated "church" is *ekklēsia*, and it's used all over the place in the New Testament (114 times, to be exact). Christians didn't invent the word, however. *Ekklēsia* was a well-known political word in the Greek and Roman world long before Christians started using it to describe their communities.[1]

In ancient Greece, the *ekklēsia* was "the regular gathering of male Athenian citizens to listen to, discuss, and vote on decrees that affected every aspect of Athenian life, both public and private."[2] This group would gather thirty to forty times a year and vote on many political issues, "from financial matters to religious ones, from public festivals to war, from treaties with foreign powers to regulations governing ferry boats."[3] The *ekklēsia* of Athens was indeed "the most central and most definitive institution of the Athenian democracy."[4]

In the first-century Roman world, *ekklēsia* retained many of its political connotations from ancient Greece.[5] A civic gathering was called an *ekklēsia*, where certain male citizens would gather and make political and religious decisions.[6] A "preacher" (*kēryx*, also translated "herald") would call an *ekklēsia*; once the group gathered, they would offer prayers, proclaim curses against wrongdoers, make animal sacrifices, and discuss and vote on various civic and political issues.[7]

We can see this political aspect of *ekklēsia* at play in the book of Acts. When Paul and his companions were in Ephesus, their preaching nearly started a riot. The leading citizens of the city rushed into the theater and held an "assembly" (*ekklēsia*) to determine what to do with these Christian rabble-rousers (19:32, 39–41). In other words, the pagan leaders called an *ekklēsia* to figure out what to do with Jesus' *ekklēsia*.

It is noteworthy, therefore, that Paul and other New Testament writers referred to the gathered body of believers as an *ekklēsia*. There were other terms they could have used, like *synagōgē* ("place of assembly") or *koinōnia* ("fellowship"). Instead, they deliberately chose *ekklēsia*—a word packed with political meaning.[8]

This is where our watered-down, de-politicized understanding of *church* can mislead us. It fogs up our interpretive lenses and prevents us from appreciating the true scandal of Paul's message. Paul didn't throw Ephesus into an uproar by doing "churchy" things, like preaching sermons about a private savior who touched hearts without touching politics. Rather, Paul proclaimed that Jesus is Lord, and this was a politically disruptive thing to say.

Paul's gospel, in fact, destabilized the entire economy of the city of Ephesus. People were converting to Christ and therefore leaving behind their idols, which is bad for business if you're an idol maker. According to one silversmith, "There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty" (Acts 29:27). Paul's proclamation that Jesus is King was an affront to Artemis, the patron goddess of the city, who was believed to be the source of the city's economic success. Wealth and idolatry, and the idolatry of wealth, walked hand in hand. And the gospel Paul preached disrupted both religion and politics.

In the ancient world, there was no separation between religion and politics; they went together like butter on bread.[9] Artemis wasn't just some goddess that people in Ephesus worshipped in the privacy of their individual lives. Rather, the Ephesians believed that their city's political success was intertwined with their devotion to Artemis.[10] If Artemis lost followers or didn't receive the homage she was due, she would remove her blessing from the city. This was what threw the city into a panic.

How should we, as exiles, interact with and respond to the politics of the empire?

Like the Hebrew exiles before them (Jer. 29:7), the Ephesian Christians were called to seek the good of their city. But they weren't called to prop Jesus up next to Artemis (or Caesar) to form a dual allegiance. *Shalom* would be manifest in Ephesus when colonies of heaven carried out the divine mission to be a light to the nations, to practice and promote the upside-down values of Christ and become a faithful presence in the city. Yes, this might have an effect on your job, your bank account, and your reputation. High-status people might look down on you for hanging out with immigrants and women and slaves and such. The gospel might interrupt your vision of making Ephesus great again. But "the political task of Christians is to be the church," to embody an alternative way of life under the lordship of King Jesus.[11]

Paul's preaching in Ephesus wasn't the first time the gospel threw a city into an uproar. Luke tells us about a similar political upheaval in Thessalonica, where Paul was accused of "turn[ing] the world upside down" and "acting contrary to Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king—Jesus" (Acts 17:6–7 CSB). If *Jesus* is king, then Caesar must not be. The Thessalonians interpreted the gospel through a political lens. And I don't think they misunderstood Paul.

Preaching sermons about how to pray or read the Bible typically doesn't cause cities to riot. But preaching the good news that Rome had enthroned a new King by crucifying him threatened the legitimacy of the existing empire. Belonging to an *ekklēsia* that publicly announced this message was politically subversive.

The first-century church wasn't an apolitical spiritual gathering where individual Christians left their Roman politics at the door and picked them back up on their way out. It certainly wasn't a place where Christians mounted a Roman flag next to a Christian one. Rather, church was the foretaste of God's kingdom, a colony of heaven on earth. It was a place, a family, a gathering where God's plan for governing the world was being revealed and practiced, where participants submitted themselves to *God's* rule in realms like economics, immigration, bodily autonomy, war, violence, power, justice, and sexuality. Christians believed they were called to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1–5). They also believed that governing authorities were empowered by Satan (Rev. 13:1–18) and would one day be destroyed by God (19:11–21).

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. I can already see some raised hands in the back. Even though we'll wrestle with some contemporary political questions in this book, my main goal is to lay a thick biblical foundation for constructing a Christian political identity. How should we, as exiles, interact with and respond to the politics of the empire? Before we address today's political environment, we need to understand why a peace-preaching Jew living on the fringes of the Roman Empire was crucified for treason and how a Jew from Tarsus could be accused of turning the world upside down by telling people about Jesus. Before looking at the crater

Jesus left in the political world, we'll venture back even further to the formation of the nation of Israel, followed by the moment when "exile" became a political identity for the people of God.

What This Book Is About

As we begin our historical investigation, let me offer four clarifications of what this book is all about.

First, my focus will be on what scholars call biblical theology or exegetical theology. This isn't primarily a work of political theology. Political theology is its own discipline, and while I've benefited much from political theology scholars, I don't claim to be one of them.[12] I'm first and foremost an exegete—an interpreter of Scripture—so this is the lane I want to stay in. I'll explore some implications of our exegesis for political theology in chapters 9 and 10, but I'll do so cautiously.

Second, with this exegetical focus in mind, one of my goals is to show that huge swaths of Scripture are political in nature. (I'll define *political* below.) Not only do nations and empires play a significant role in the storyline of Scripture, but the gospel itself is profoundly political—just not in the way many partisan-minded Christians think it is. There's a saying that goes, "The gospel is political but not partisan," and I agree. Scripture should, of course, determine how we view political questions today (immigration, warfare, racism, economics, sexuality, etc.). But Scripture also warns against letting our hearts become co-opted by the kingdoms of this earth. If I can be frank, I think a massive problem in the church today, especially in the United States, is that Christians hold the Bible in one hand

and secular politics in the other. We fail to let the former (the Bible) shape the latter (our politics). Or, even worse, we form opinions about secular politics and *then* go back to the Bible and use it to rubber-stamp our pre-formed political views. Just take how some Christians seem more passionate about the Second Amendment than the second commandment. (Knowing what the former is and not the latter might illustrate the point.) Or think about how some Christians might react to questions like "Is it wrong to pledge allegiance to the American flag?" or "Does welfare help the poor or hurt them?" or "Are Christian nationalists more of a threat to society than Marxists?" or "Should Christians support America's military?" Even asking these questions might start a fight, especially in church. But is our anger around these topics fueled by the narrative of Scripture? Or are we motivated by one of America's partisan political tribes? I suspect that some of the political values we passionately cling to weren't unearthed by a steady study of Scripture but largely shaped by our current political parties and news outlets.

Part of the reason for this book, then, is to soak ourselves in the narrative of Scripture, with all its politically relevant themes, and let Scripture become the primary lens through which we interact with the politics of earthly empires.

Third, I want us to take (more) seriously the political implications of our allegiance to King Jesus. To put it plainly, I think "God and country" ideology cuts against the grain of Scripture and, in its more extreme forms, is idolatry. By "God and country," I mean the view that Christians should give their allegiance *both* to God *and* to their country—whatever country that may be. I'm not talking about submitting to governing authorities or being good citizens. The Bible

clearly teaches that. I'm talking about allegiance. I'm talking about being more passionate about American values than Christian ones, or not knowing the difference. I'm talking about losing your mind when your favorite political leader doesn't get elected. And while the slogan "God and country" might evoke images of right-wing Christianity, I think the problem of dual allegiance exists on both sides of the political aisle.

Now, some of you might say, "Of course we shouldn't give *equal* allegiance to God and country; it's God first, country second." (I think even this approach is wrongheaded, as we'll see later.) And yet, though many American Christians say this, our lives often prove otherwise. Partisan politics have divided churches and friends and families *who are Christians*. This division suggests to me that our allegiance to the state is sometimes, in practice, stronger than our allegiance to Christ.

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine told me she was thankful that her unsaved neighbor couldn't make it to church. I thought it was strange for a Christian to be thankful that a non-Christian didn't come to church, but it made sense when my friend explained why. She had been building a relationship with her neighbor—who happened to be a Democrat—and finally asked if she'd be interested in visiting church with her. The neighbor said yes and was really excited to see what church was all about. But when Sunday rolled around, the neighbor told my friend that she was sick and couldn't make it. "I was disappointed at first," my friend told me. "But then, after hearing my pastor's sermon, I was actually thankful my neighbor couldn't be there." She went on to explain why: "My pastor happened to preach a sermon that was more about right-wing

politics than about Jesus. Had my neighbor heard the sermon, she would have been shamed for being a Democrat. She would have believed that being a Christian meant voting Republican."

Instead of hearing that she was a sinner in need of grace, this woman would have heard that she was a Democrat in need of becoming a Republican. Which, of course, is heresy.

One of the goals of this book is to show that the dual-allegiance "God and country" view runs counter to how God's people viewed themselves throughout Scripture. The Jews living under Babylonian or Persian rule, or Christians living under Roman rule, would find our undiluted patriotism quite odd. Instead of a "God and country" lens, I want us to cultivate an exilic lens—one where we see ourselves as exiles taking up temporary residence in a modern-day Babylon.

Instead of hearing that she was a sinner in need of grace, this woman would have heard that she was a Democrat in need of becoming a Republican.

Fourth, this book isn't partisan. It's probably more anti-partisan than anything, though what I mean by that phrase will take the rest of this book to unpack. I may say things that challenge one side of the partisan aisle, but I'll also do the same with the other side. I do believe that numerically, the church (in the United States, at least) has a far greater problem with right-wing idolatry than left-wing. While the numbers are heavier on one side, however, I see political idolatry to be equally problematic on both sides. So please don't misunderstand any critique of the political right as support for the political left or vice versa.

Also, since I'm writing from the context of the United States, I'll frequently have this country in mind as I reflect on politics. I do hope that my reading of Scripture will be transferable to Christians living out their exile in other countries, especially other powerful countries like Russia, China, India, and the United Kingdom. Either way, for good or for ill, many people in the world are affected by the global influence of the United States, making my admittedly US context somewhat relevant for all Christians across the globe.

My Political Journey

Like most books, this one has a story behind it, which I suspect might be similar to some of yours. I was raised in a staunchly right-wing, conservative Christian environment. I believed that Christians voted Republican while non-Christians voted Democrat. Ronald Reagan possessed near-messianic status, and right-wing values were all equated with being a faithful Christian: opposing abortion; supporting the death penalty; being pro-military, anti-Communist,

pro-guns, anti-homosexuality, anti-environmental-concerns, anti-anything-Democrats-say-and-believe. Put simply, left-wingers were our enemy.

Throughout my twenties and thirties, I slowly drifted away from this mindset. To be clear, I didn't conclude that all right-wing values are bad. I think some of these values resonate with Christianity, while others seem more American than biblical. But I began to see the danger of a partisan tribalism where everyone on the left is viewed as the enemy and right-wing political positions are equated with Christianity.

So I left Republican right-wing Christianity and peeked into the door of left-wing Christianity. Honestly, it looked eerily the same. I saw another set of values that resonated with the way of Jesus at times, but I also saw the same kind of tribalistic, anti-all-things-the-other-side-believes attitude that had driven me out of right-wing Christianity. In my experience, fundamentalism is an attitude that can exist equally on both the left and the right. The further you go on either side of the left/right spectrum, the stronger the fundamentalist tendencies: partisan groupthink governs your values, and members of the other party are no longer neighbors but enemies.

I've come to believe that, for Christians in America, allegiance to either the Republican right or the Democrat left is toxic. It divides the church, destroys our witness, and brings profound joy to the Devil, who's always looking for creative ways to derail the kingdom of God. Over the last ten years or so, I've been using the phrase "exile in Babylon" to describe a different kind of Christian political identity, a theological alternative to the toxic left/right options so many Christians have accepted.

It's important to note that my use of *exile* is very different from how some (usually right-wing) Christians might use the term to lament the fact that they no longer have power and influence in what used to be a "Christian nation." They see culture as having departed from its once-Christian roots, and the way to get back on track—to return from exile—is to vote Christians or conservatives into political office and take back the culture for God. I think this perspective is theologically anemic; it uses the language of exile but severs it from its biblical roots. And, to be honest, it feels a bit whiny to me. Like some rich teenager who just had his Tesla taken away. Anyway, it should be clear rather quickly that this brand of exile thinking is *not* what I'll be arguing for.

That brings us to this book. *Exiles* is an attempt to put biblical flesh on the idea that Christians should view ourselves as exiles living in the shadow of a foreign empire. This kind of perspective should cultivate a robust political identity *from which* we think through various political questions today. One of my ultimate goals—one that's pretty vanilla, if you think about it—is to shift our political conversations as Christians toward what the Bible actually says rather than what our favorite political pundits say. When faced with a question like "What's your view of immigration?" I want to see Christians intuitively *start* that conversation by considering what the Bible says about immigrants. Or the question, "Are you a capitalist or democratic socialist?" Rather than parroting what your favorite political party tells you to say, I want your knee-jerk reaction to be to look to the Bible. And the confidence of your response should match the depth of your study of Scripture on economics. It actually has much to say.

Viewing ourselves as exiles living under a foreign empire should strengthen the church's unity and group identity. Imagine a world where our common baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus bonds us together much more than our political views. Imagine a world where you feel closer to a fellow believer who voted differently than you do to someone who shares your political leanings. Imagine a world where being left wing or right wing aren't the only options, where Christ's kingdom creates a whole different way of viewing politics. I fear that we've so absorbed the narratives of our political surroundings that they've stunted our political and theological imagination. Secular politics has created a playing field with only the Left and the Right, liberals and conservatives. "Which one are you?" people ask. "Are you left or right?" I long for the day when Christians confidently smile at this question and answer, "I'm diagonal."

To be clear, by renouncing the left/right political options and saying, "I'm diagonal," I am not at all arguing for a centrist or moderate position that exists somewhere between the left/right options. Centrists are defined by the same political grid, whereas I'm arguing for a different grid altogether—a political identity that doesn't derive from the secular left/center/right options. Exiles don't have to let Babylon (or any empire where they live) determine what their moral grid looks like or what categories are available.

Defining Our Terms

Before we jump in, a few quick definitions.

Political is a tricky word with many definitions. One of the most helpful and concise definitions I've found comes from theologians

William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, who define *political* as "the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people."[13] I also like the way Timothy Gombis relates politics to the *polis*:

> Politics involves the proper ordering of social practices and relationships, and patterns of economic exchange within a social group.… Politics has to do with all sorts of behaviors in the *polis*. That term—*polis*—is the Greek term that denoted ancient cities and all that held them together as cohesive social and cultural units. The *polis* is the body politic, a gathered people regarded as a political body under an organized government. Politics, then, has to do with ruling and socially ordering a *polis*.[14]

An organized society, or *polis*, will develop certain approaches to resources (economics), leadership, who's allowed in and on what terms (citizenship, immigration, etc.), sexuality and marriage, how to defend the community against possible attacks (military and policing), legitimate uses of power, how we care for those who lack resources, and so on.[15] All this applies to how nations are organized—which is what most people think of when they hear the word *political*—but it also applies to any kind of society or community, including the church. This is what I mean when I say the church is political. More accurately, the church is theopolitical: its politics should be based on what God (*theos*) thinks about these matters.

I've also already used the term *Babylon*, which is the name of an ancient city and nation. But in Judeo-Christian tradition, the term *Babylon* came to apply not just to the ancient city and the whole Babylonian Empire but to all nations and empires on earth that are Babylon-like, especially ones that are very wealthy, powerful, militaristic, and oppressive.[16] I'll spend a good deal of time unpacking this metaphorical (or, more precisely, metonymic) use of *Babylon* in chapters 3 and 8.

Empire is another term that's defined in rather extreme ways. Some people use the term so narrowly that you practically need to build a Death Star to count as an empire. Others use the term so broadly that nearly everything can be an empire. Indeed, whole books have been written to define and explain the notion of empire. I like Peter Leithart's description of *empire* as "a particular distribution of international political power." He goes on to explain that the terms *empire* and *imperial*

> refer loosely to certain formal political structures in which one people, kingdom, or nation *exercises dominance over or otherwise leads and guides and shapes another nation or people*. Sometimes, the "imperial" nation forces another nation or nations to do its bidding by violence, threats of violence, economic manipulations, or other tools of domination [but in other situations] one nation voluntarily submits itself to the leadership and protection of another nation and … the imperial nation does not "dominate" the subordinate nation.[17]

By this definition, God's people found themselves living in several empires throughout Scripture: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.[18] I'm no political scientist, but according to Leithart's definition, the United States of America would also qualify as an empire, or at least as empire-like. It's hard to disagree with political theorist Samir Puri on this point:

> While the USA does not self-identify as an empire, it has become the embodiment of an informal empire. Its global reach includes: military bases dotted around the world; fleets of globally deployable aircraft carriers; strategic alliances on every continent; orbital satellites that guide missiles; technology innovations with global consumer appeal; and economic power underpinned by the USA dollar as the world's reserve currency. The USA can dominate many parts of the world, or at least it can make its influence telling. For now it remains *the* country that can intervene militarily virtually anywhere to defend its vision of world order, and its notions of right and wrong.[19]

This point isn't really debated among people who live outside the US. I recently asked my British friend Peter Williams if he thought the US was an empire. (As a Brit, Peter knows a thing or two about empire.) He looked at me like I'd asked him if 2 + 2 = 4.

As for the meaning of *exile*, it has too many layers and shades to cram into a single definition. It's a place, but not a place. It's

a human state of being, but not a human state. It doesn't lament but *celebrates* its lack of worldly power. It's church, but more than church, and it certainly serves good coffee. It's an attitude, a theology, a posture, a political identity. Exile is bread and wine, resistance and submission, sacrifice and subversion. It seeks the good of the city, which sometimes throws the city into an uproar. Exile is enemy love, cultural weakness, and divine power that is shaped by the sacrificial self-giving of King Jesus.

I mean, it really is hard to define. It takes a whole book to unpack and a lifetime to embrace, which is what I hope to help us do in the pages that follow, beginning with Israel's upside-down kingdom and how this relates to living as exiles in the shadow of empire.