



RECLAIMING THE
CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

POLITICAL THOUGHT A STUDENT'S GUIDE

Hunter Baker

Series Editor: David S. Dockery



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POLITICAL THOUGHT A STUDENT'S GUIDE

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Political Thought: A Student's Guide

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SERIES PREFACE

RECLAIMING THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series is designed to provide an overview of the distinctive way the church has read the Bible, formulated doctrine, provided education, and engaged the culture. The contributors to this series all agree that personal faith and genuine Christian piety are essential for the life of Christ followers and for the church. These contributors also believe that helping others recognize the importance of serious thinking about God, Scripture, and the world needs a renewed emphasis at this time in order that the truth claims of the Christian faith can be passed along from one generation to the next. The study guides in this series will enable us to see afresh how the Christian faith shapes how we live, how we think, how we write books, how we govern society, and how we relate to one another in our churches and social structures. The richness of the Christian intellectual tradition provides guidance for the complex challenges that believers face in this world.

This series is particularly designed for Christian students and others associated with college and university campuses, including faculty, staff, trustees, and other various constituents. The contributors to the series will explore how the Bible has been interpreted in the history of the church, as well as how theology has been formulated. They will ask: How does the Christian faith influence our understanding of culture, literature, philosophy, government, beauty, art, or work? How does the Christian intellectual tradition help us understand truth? How does the Christian intellectual tradition shape our approach to education? We believe that this series is not only timely but that it meets an important need, because the secular culture in which we now find ourselves is, at

best, indifferent to the Christian faith, and the Christian world—at least in its more popular forms—tends to be confused about the beliefs, heritage, and tradition associated with the Christian faith.

At the heart of this work is the challenge to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, and to serve church and society. We believe that both the breadth and the depth of the Christian intellectual tradition need to be reclaimed, revitalized, renewed, and revived for us to carry forward this work. These study guides will seek to provide a framework to help introduce students to the great tradition of Christian thinking, seeking to highlight its importance for understanding the world, its significance for serving both church and society, and its application for Christian thinking and learning. The series is a starting point for exploring important ideas and issues such as truth, meaning, beauty, and justice.

We trust that the series will help introduce readers to the apostles, church fathers, Reformers, philosophers, theologians, historians, and a wide variety of other significant thinkers. In addition to well-known leaders such as Clement, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards, readers will be pointed to William Wilberforce, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, Johann Sebastian Bach, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, George Washington Carver, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Michael Polanyi, Henry Luke Orombi, and many others. In doing so, we hope to introduce those who throughout history have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to be serious about the life of the mind while simultaneously being deeply committed Christians. These efforts to strengthen serious Christian thinking and scholarship will not be limited to the study of theology, scriptural interpretation, or philosophy, even though these areas provide the framework for understanding the Christian faith for all other areas of exploration. In order for us to reclaim and advance the Christian intellectual tradition, we must have some

understanding of the tradition itself. The volumes in this series will seek to explore this tradition and its application for our twenty-first-century world. Each volume contains helpful tools, such as a glossary, study questions, and a list of resources for further study, which we trust will provide helpful guidance for our readers.

I am deeply grateful to the series editorial committee: Timothy George, John Woodbridge, Michael Wilkins, Niel Nielson, Philip Ryken, and Hunter Baker. Each of these colleagues joins me in thanking our various contributors for their fine work. We all express our appreciation to Justin Taylor, Jill Carter, Allan Fisher, Lane Dennis, and the Crossway team for their enthusiastic support for the project. We offer the project with the hope that students will be helped, faculty and Christian leaders will be encouraged, institutions will be strengthened, churches will be built up, and, ultimately, that God will be glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria

David S. Dockery,
Series Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

There are many ways one could go about writing an introductory text on political thought. Because this book is part of a series of volumes intentionally written to offer brief invitations to different academic subjects, I have chosen not to structure the book as a survey of the major thinkers.

Instead, I have elected to introduce readers to political thought through the use of familiar life circumstances, imaginative devices, and a discussion of the great themes, which have been important and remain so. Therefore, this is a book that ranges across things such as the family, the state of nature, order, justice, freedom, and Christianity.

It is my hope that the discussion will prove stimulating and that many who read this book will decide to make further and more detailed study in the area of political philosophy. Regardless, serious consideration of the issues raised here will lead to greater capacity for evaluating political proposals and the claims that go with them. I knew I was on the right track with this book when my wife, who has long had very little interest in politics and is very scientifically minded, read the manuscript and subsequently told me she suddenly began to see the things I had described in the text everywhere in the news.

The reader may even feel empowered to independently agree with or take issue with the author! And nothing would make him happier.

SECTION 1

**WAYS TO BEGIN THINKING
ABOUT POLITICS**

BEGINNING WITH THE FAMILIAR

Aristotle famously identified the family as the primary unit of political society. One might be tempted to object and insist on the primacy of the individual, but the Greek philosopher's reasoning was that there is no society without the family. Hillary Clinton wrote a book on the theme of an African proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a child." Aristotle insisted, more basically, that it takes a family to form the basis of the broader society.¹

Whether one centers political analysis on the individual, the family, the village, the nation-state, or the world community, the family is the first place in which we must interact with each other. It is our first society. The novelist Pat Conroy once said that each divorce results in the death of a small civilization.² And he is right.

In part because of these reasons, I would like to begin our thinking about political thought with some personal reflections on family. My other motivation is that this is an introductory text. Many people are intimidated by phrases such as *political thought* or *political philosophy*. If we begin by talking about something virtually all of us can understand, such as the family, we can take a subject that may seem overly complicated or cerebral and make it more accessible. Families have features such as leadership, order, fairness, debate, restrictions, coercion, and freedoms. There are priorities, decisions, boundaries, budgets, and many other aspects

¹Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 1, chap. 2. (I will follow this form of quoting certain classical texts that have long been in the public domain and are available in many different editions.)

²Pat Conroy, "Requiem for a Marriage," *Reader's Digest*, January 1988, 109–12.

that mirror political life. Rather than speak of families generally, I propose to talk about mine and the one in which my wife was raised. Through our experiences, you will be able to spot some fundamental ideas about politics.

I was raised in a family that had and has its own way of doing things. In this family, I had a great deal of freedom to decide what I was going to do. I don't mean that I determined my own bedtime or made my own rules, but rather that I had the discretion to figure out what to do with my time outside of musts such as attending school.

While our family often ate together, sometimes we didn't. On occasion, my folks would eat and talk in the kitchen while my sister and I ate sandwiches of our own heterodox design in front of the television (white bread, sliced ham, and A-1 steak sauce!). There were large unstructured patches of time available in any given day. I spent many happy hours alone in my room reading comic books, building with Legos, creating tents out of sheets and folding chairs, and even writing stories at my little desk. Other times, I wandered outside just looking around or playing games of imagination. Through sheer repetition over long hours, I taught myself how to play basketball by heaving up endless shots toward the hoop that seemed so far away when I began. I learned tennis in a similar fashion, beating fuzzy green spheres into the masonry on the side of our house and learning how to predict their rebound.

There were also more structured periods. I often had baseball practices and games to attend. My father and I regularly played catch for about thirty minutes or an hour after he came home from work. Friends and I frequently organized pickup games of football (we played it full contact with no pads or helmets) in each other's yard.

The overriding theme of my childhood was bounded freedom. There were limits all around me. I had to finish homework. I had to be in bed by a certain time (reading if not sleeping). I had to go

to school. A number of family activities were not optional. But what I remember so clearly was the great liberty I had to pursue my interests and desires. My family was a happy one, though it bucked the typical image by being one in which each member had a lot of time to him- or herself. I loved that.

The life I had as a child is a good example of a political idea that has had special resonance in America. The idea is ordered liberty. Ordered liberty means that to the degree a person is willing to govern himself, he can be free of a lot of external control over the details of his life. In other words, part of the reason I may have had a lot of liberty in my childhood is that I had little tendency to misuse it. (Committing acts of mischief never held any attraction for me. My internal moral compass was fairly strong.) In this way of thinking, we move toward the true meaning of liberty. We tend to think of liberty as a synonym for freedom or an absolute release from constraints of any kind, but to do so is to fail to think deeply enough. It is true that words such as *liberty* and *confinement* are effectively opposites, but it is also true that “liberty” is often opposed to another word, which is *license*. Used in this way, license refers to a wrong use of freedom or a wrong direction of human agency. Liberty implies a correct use of freedom.

Before I go further, I must admit that there are some drawbacks to the type of upbringing I describe. My folks did not exercise a great deal of control over the books I read, shows I watched, music I listened to, or videos my friends and I rented. (The one real constraint I recall is my father personally asking me not to see the film *The Exorcist* because of the disturbing images he recalled from the movie. Without question, I honored the request and still do.) In the course of the high school years, I probably consumed a lot of books and other media that were less than appropriate for a young person. And that kind of thing, of course, is one of the costs of freedom.

My wife, on the other hand, grew up in a different sort of

family. Her comings and goings were more limited. Her parents made firm rules about things such as the kind of music she could listen to. Popular music in the style of Top 40 rock and roll was off-limits. They had a much stronger bent toward group activity. Freedom was less of a value than living out a certain type of excellence that was centered on being a good Christian. For her family, this meant avoiding a variety of influences that were viewed as corrupting or worldly. It also meant choosing to spend a great deal of time doing things such as memorizing Scripture. The family also put a lot of work into traveling together and developing a record of memorable experiences as a group. Unsurprisingly, they achieved what they set out to do. They are a tightly bound unit with an incredible collection of slide shows from their journeys!

Based on the description I've offered so far, you can see that my wife's family was not about something like ordered liberty in the way mine was. In the Baker family individuals had wide discretion in how to order their lives as long as they avoided crashing certain boundary lines. Instead, her family identified a specific type of excellence centered on group participation and Christianity. The parents provided substantial guidance (and good, old-fashioned parental coercion) in that direction with the goal of producing the desired result. If we were to associate a political ideal with her family, it would be something like civic excellence or civic idealism.

Today when we visit her family, I experience a bit of culture shock (something that is not unusual for those who cross family lines via marriage). Now, the dissonance I feel is not centered on the Christian confession that I have come to embrace. The trouble for me is that for a period of several days I have to reconcile my own desire for broad discretion and liberty with my wife's family ideal of group participation. I want to wander, go off by myself for a couple of hours, and just make sure I get back for the important parts. To me, that sort of accountability to the group seems perfectly reasonable. To them, especially the women, my model

represents preferring the self to the group and rejecting the collective effort to make memories together.

My wife experiences a parallel but opposite sort of disconnect when she is the Martin among the Bakers. We get together at some rented cabin or at my parents' home, where people pretty much break off and do what they want. There are times when we all gather for some meal or activity, but there is a great deal of spinning away from the nucleus as individuals or subgroups and charting separate paths in the context of the overall family vacation. Having grown up in a very different type of family, she feels as though the activities are too fragmented and that there is not enough togetherness. For her, love expresses itself through careful planning and cohesiveness, but my family tends to feel happy and reunited sharing the same general area and periodically doing something as a group.

You may be reading this and thinking the description is very personal and not really related to politics, but what I am describing in terms of different types of families and the ways they interact is the same fundamental dynamic that is present in politics. Both types of people (and other types!) live together in political communities. The same values and instincts contend with one another. Should we all be highly plugged into a community collectivity with our lives tightly wound together (often in nonoptional ways)? Or should we place a very high value on individual discretion? What is more important?

As the next short chapter will demonstrate, families are not synonymous with political societies and should not be confused as such. However, the dynamics of freedom, discretion, group activity, individual and joint identification of ideals, supervision, and control all apply in both the family and the political community. For that reason, thinking about how things were in your family is not a bad way of beginning to evaluate political life.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FAMILIES AND POLITICAL COMMUNITIES

The society grows directly out of the family. Aristotle described a process wherein the family spins off other families. This group of families becomes a village. Villages eventually merge into towns. We can see the merger between paternal power and political power in the similarity between the word for relatives (*kin*) and the word for the chief of the race or tribe (*king*).¹

Indeed, one of the great political problems for the ages has been to determine the degree to which political power should be similar to paternal/maternal power. At the height of the power of monarchies, kings and queens certainly did consider themselves to be something like fathers and mothers of their people. And just as children do not understand everything that is necessary for them to grow and flourish, so, too (the logic went), did the subjects of monarchs lack the capacity to act on their own behalf.

Though throughout much of Western civilization people have enjoyed certain rights that bear some similarity to what we think of as modern democracy, it was not until fairly recently (historically speaking) that the hold of monarchical and aristocratic power was decisively broken in the West. In the wave of breaking away, John Locke argued that paternal power and political power are not the same thing. Grown human beings are not comparable

¹Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 1, chap. 2.

to children in their capacities relative to parents. Instead, they are mature, rational creatures very much like those who would claim the right to rule them. So, though the political society comes into existence through and is sustained by the family, it is not synonymous with the family. Citizens are not children and are not equally subject to coercion (even in their interest) in the same way as children are.²

And so, in terms of our historical drift, we have moved away from the tendency (whether enforced or organic) to view political power as paternal power. We look at ourselves as free and rational individuals capable of making decisions about the community matters that affect us and about how we should lead our own lives. But the question of how we will live together (an alternate phrasing of Francis Schaeffer's famous *How Shall We Then Live?*) remains.

Free individuals still have to make choices about community life as their paths almost inevitably cross. Indeed, we find that we can better satisfy our wants and needs within the context of mutual relationship with other human beings. Thomas Paine called the voluntary phase of this relationship "society" and referred to the necessary evil of the involuntary part of living together as "government."³ The question boils down to something like, *How big do we want this involuntary part to be?*

²John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, chaps. 1 and 6.

³Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*. Paine's valuable and much-reprinted essay may be found at <http://www.constitution.org/civ/comsense.htm>.

+ Politics affects everyone everywhere. Yet most people do not know how to communicate or think methodically (much less unemotionally) about the issues at hand. What we need is for our thinking to be grounded in the basic framework of order, freedom, justice, and equality.

Award-winning professor Hunter Baker helps political amateurs gain a foundational understanding of the subject and encourages seasoned political observers to find a fresh perspective in this book. Learn how to fruitfully consider and discuss politics and gain a greater capacity for evaluating political proposals and the claims that go with them.

"In lively and engaging prose, Hunter Baker offers us an excellent, accessible introduction to the fundamental themes of political discourse—and to why these matter for the rising generation."

George H. Nash, author, *Books and the Founding Fathers*

"This series meets a significant need, not only for students, but also for ministers and academics who are charged with the responsibility of helping us think and live faithfully as followers of Christ."

Robert B. Sloan, President, Houston Baptist University

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The Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition series

is designed for Christian students and those associated with college campuses, including faculty, staff, and trustees. These guidebooks address the common challenges in major academic disciplines by reclaiming the best of the Christian intellectual tradition—demonstrating that vibrant, world-changing Christianity assumes a commitment to the integration of faith and scholarship. With illustrations, reflection questions, and a list of resources for further study, this series is sure to be a timely tool in both Christian and secular universities, influencing the next generation of leaders in the church, the academy, and the world.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION / POLITICAL THOUGHT