



Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule (SCDS)

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"Leeman's well-argued book is a welcome reminder that the full reality of the church is to be found in the local congregation. I cannot imagine that his book will not become a standard work in this area of theological inquiry."

— Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law, Duke University

The Church as an Embassy

In the latest book in the Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture series, Jonathan Leeman establishes a doctrine of the church that does two things: (1) replaces the map of politics and religion that many Christians have been using for centuries, and (2) explains where the local church fits on this new map as a political institution of Christ's rule.

"Jonathan Leeman is one of the most careful, intelligent and skilled theological minds of our day, particularly in matters of ecclesiology," writes R. Albert Mohler Jr. "This new volume is a courageous defense of the centrality and indispensability of the local church. Political Church is a model for sound exegetical, biblical and systematic theology that makes a powerful argument. For anyone thinking seriously about ecclesiology, local church ministry, the relationship between church and state, or even religious liberty, this volume is a brilliant resource."

In this excerpt, Leeman explains why the church should be seen as an embassy and how the church as an institution got to this point.

Political science professor Robert Putnam, in a well-known 1995 essay titled "Bowling Alone," observed that "more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted." Putnam's project, which focused on declining levels of American participation in voluntary organizations, was aided by dozens of research assistants who poured over countless city directories, Masonic Lodge yearbooks, membership statistics for the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Rotary Club files, Episcopal Church reports, and more. Indeed, one year of my own life was spent in the Library of Congress, Harvard's Widener Library, and the offices of many national and local organizations searching out those very membership figures. Not, perhaps, the *most* riveting year of my life.

A foundational assumption of all this neo-Tocquevillian analysis, and an assumption of many democratic Westerners, is that local churches are one more voluntary organization, something to be classified with the likes of Little League and the Sierra Club. Few people would deny that local churches are *politically significant*, not least Putnam, who argues that participating in voluntary organizations is instrumental in "making democracy work," as he puts it in another book by that title. But that is qualitatively different from saying that local churches are political associations outright, as one would with, say, the US embassy in London, England.

Yet the primary claim of this book is that the local church is just such a political assembly. Indeed, the church is a kind of embassy, only it represents a kingdom of even greater political consequence to the nations and their governors. And this embassy represents a kingdom not from across geographic space but from across eschatological time.



Jonathan Leeman (PhD, University of Wales) is the editorial director for 9Marks, an organization that produces church leadership resources in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love* and *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, as well as the editor of *The Underestimated Gospel*. He is also an occasional lecturer at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and an adjunct teacher for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

After earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in political science, Leeman began his career in journalism working as an editor for an international economics magazine. Since his call to

In other words, this book is concerned with the biblical and theological question of what constitutes a local church. The answer, it will argue, is that Jesus grants Christians the authority to establish local churches as visible embassies of his end-time rule through the “keys of the kingdom” described in the Gospel of Matthew. By virtue of both the keys and a traditional Protestant conception of justification by faith alone, the local church exists as a political assembly that publicly represents King Jesus, displays the justice and righteousness of the triune God, and pronounces Jesus’ claim upon the nations and their governments.

Does this mean I am charging my former employer with a methodological error, that churches are not really voluntary organizations after all? From the standpoint of the state, to be sure, church membership should be voluntary. The state has no authority here, or so I will maintain. The question is, how do the Christian Scriptures present the local church, and where do they fit onto a political landscape of the nations as the Bible conceives of that landscape? Should churches be classified as institutions of state, voluntary organizations or something else altogether? The prosaic picture of a slump-shouldered research assistant typing membership statistics into Excel spreadsheets offers a useful “reality check” for any claim that the local church is a “political” institution, lest we fall into useless theological abstraction. How then would the Bible’s prophets and apostles instruct a political scientist’s research assistant to classify the local church? Answering that question requires two things then: describing what the local church is and also sketching out the political landscape of the nations as the Bible conceives of it, which may be the harder part.

Of course, it is not just political scientists who classify a church as a club- like organization. Christian historians of the first century, too, look for affinities between churches and the public religious associations and voluntary associations of the Greco-Roman world. Such historians tell us that these organizations, like churches, employed initiation rites for membership; collected membership dues; exercised discipline over their members; used kinship language, calling one another “brother” or “father”; and even gave their leaders titles like *episkopos* and *diakonos*. These historians do not necessarily mean to say that churches were merely one more such organization; and I personally do not mean to deny that analogies between the two types of entities exist, any more than I would deny that analogies exist between the church and the household, an analogy that is biblical (e.g., 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17; cf. Eph 2:19). Many such comparisons and analogies make for useful avenues of theological inquiry and formulation.

Still, my purpose here is to argue that the institutional essence of the local assembly is a political unity. A church’s members are united in more ways than politically. But what binds the local church together as a distinct body of people, distinct from the nations *and* distinct from Christians united to other churches, is the fact that Jesus Christ’s universal lordship gets exercised *there* – among *them*. *Here* is where the keys of the kingdom are exercised in membership, discipline and doctrinal affirmation. Christ’s political rule may be “not of this

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BOOK EXCERPT

ministry, he has earned an MDiv and a PhD in theology and worked as an interim pastor. He currently serves as an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church and lives with his wife and four daughters in a suburb of Washington, D.C.

world,” meaning it has its source or origin not in the world but in heaven (Jn 18:36). And his rule unites all Christians everywhere invisibly. But this universal rule is visibly and institutionally manifest in history through the proclamation of the gospel and the binding and loosing activity of the local church, the two activities that constitute an otherwise unincorporated group of Christians as a particular church. To become a member of a church is to be declared a citizen of Christ’s kingdom. It is a local church’s politically authorized corporate existence that constitutes a group of Christians as a visible embassy of Christ’s kingdom on earth and that, in turn, formally authorizes every individual within that assembly to represent the King’s name before the nations and their governors as an ambassador.

That is not to say that the authority exercised in a local church bespeaks its own self-contained politics and that I am using the term metaphorically, as when one speaks of “office politics” or “university politics.” Rather, the local church’s rule is but one bolt of fabric in the larger roll of cloth that makes up Christ’s rule among the nations and their governments. The state and the church both mediate the rule of God, and unlike the mediate authority of, say, a parent, they both make an authoritative claim on the whole of a society, one by the sword and one by gospel proclamation. And backing up both claims is God’s own sword, even if that sword won’t show itself until the eschaton. The proto-liberal Thomas Hobbes observed, “The Kingdome therefore of God, is a reall, not a metaphoricall Kingdome.” What’s therefore needed, says present-day political theologian Oliver O’Donovan, is a much “fuller political conceptuality,” one that “pushes back the horizon of commonplace politics and opens it up to the activity of God.”

– Taken from the introduction

