Charles E. Gutenson. *Christians and the Common Good: How Faith Intersects with Public Life*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011.

Charles Gutenson opens by recounting his upbringing in a "'fundamentalist' Christian tradition" that helped prevent him from seeing the "political implications of the life of Jesus" (2-3). Now older and wiser, he hopes to encourage a more holistic understanding of imitating Christ. Unlike typical Christian engagements with politics, Gutenson spends most of his six chapters discussing biblical interpretation. He begins by suggesting Christians can become better readers of scripture by avoiding proof-texting, appreciating context, trying to understand the motivations behind biblical commands, and "learning to read the entire Bible holistically" (52). Next, the author argues that scripture is first and foremost about God, not humanity, and that we need to understand God's nature in order to discern God's expectations for our lives together.

In chapter four, Gutenson embarks on a grand tour of the Bible, attempting to overcome the tendency to focus on "a small handful of favorite biblical texts . . . through which everything is understood" (82). Instead, he highlights passages in the Pentateuch and Prophets as well as the New Testament that demonstrate God's concern for stewardship, justice, poverty, and even opportunities for rest. Chapter five opens with the common objection that religion is private, and even if God is concerned with the poor, governments need not be. Against this, Gutenson argues the Old Testament Years of Jubilee and Release "were not laws that God intended to apply only at some voluntary level" (127), and that in light of Romans 13 and Colossians 1, "It would be bizarre indeed to say that God has ordained the ruling powers to serve his intentions but excludes them from . . . care for the least of these" (129).

Gutenson contends that since God's commands are given for human flourishing, Christians should be able to cast their arguments "in terms of the common good" (135). Nevertheless, the church needs to be careful to remain the church and not come to rely on politics. Finally, after a reminder that outcomes are more important than specific policies, the author turns to public policy. He speeds through a range of social issues – social safety nets, taxation and the minimum wage, race relations, healthcare, inheritance

and bankruptcy laws – before ending with homosexuality and abortion. He acknowledges his positions are "right of center theologically and left of center politically," but his goal is not to prove any of them as the only Christian position (169). Rather, he hopes to begin a dialogue on "public institutions and their role in developing communities that live out God's intentions" (170).

Gutenson's book is clear, carefully argued, and easy to read, but even more impressive is his inviting style and method. As Christian discussions of politics in North America become increasingly polarized, agendas are quickly detected and dismissed. Gutenson, however, gently brings our attention back to the Bible and the character of the God revealed in it. By focusing on the interpretation and shape of the biblical narrative for most of his book, he skilfully models a kind of Christian dialogue about politics that does not immediately descend into sound-bites and proof-texts. This is a difficult achievement, and far more important than the details of his policy proposals, which lean to the left as suits his involvement with Sojourners. Still, because he intentionally leaves policies to the end and does not develop them in too much depth, even readers who do not share his politics may be persuaded to reconsider their stance.

Gutenson's method also avoids the myopic focus on Jesus common to progressive Christian politics. Instead, he draws out the social vision of the OT so powerfully that when he arrives at Matthew 5, he can simply say, "What is Jesus asking in the Sermon that we have not seen already in our review of scripture?" (104). Throughout, his exegesis demonstrates how to read the Bible as a whole.

Christians and the Common Good might have benefited from additional historical analysis. In arguing against the stereotype that religion is private, Gutenson makes a brief reference to "classical Lockean liberalism" (124), but does not otherwise explore the political and social context of individualistic biblical interpretation. Still, he provides an excellent introduction to rediscovering the political import of the Bible, and his short, lightly footnoted volume is suitable for all audiences. I recommend it for undergraduate and adult education.

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