

## **A Review of Jonathan Leeman's *Political Church* by Joseph Minich**

[Daniel Rodgers](#) has called our era an “age of fracture.” This expression captures the identity crises which obtain among all institutions seeking to navigate their way through what is often termed “liquid modernity.” The “evangelical” community is no exception to this identity crisis. The diversity of its many self-professed adherents as well as the speed at which independent influences randomly and variously come together (or apart) leads many to think that orthodox American evangelicalism is fundamentally ungrounded. Many evangelical movements conceive of themselves as a solution to this problem. Their antidotes, however, are as various as the above description would suggest - and therein the problem itself is perpetuated. For some, we must simply [deconstruct evangelical](#) identity into a loose amalgam of confessional identities. For others, there is a call to recover a sense of connectedness to the history of the church through the [rediscovery](#) of the church fathers, sacraments, and the more basic creedal items of the Christian faith (Trinity, Christology, etc).

This, of course, is the theological side of the coin. But arguably, such fracture is created or at least reinforced by a more fundamentally *practical* individualism. We live in the age of identity politics, of self-discovery - a “culture of authenticity” or “expressive individualism” as [Charles Taylor](#) puts it. If confessional particularity or creedal breadth constitutes the ideas around which we might unite, the concrete and embodied expression of this must be in the actual [communities of practice](#). This context helps to explain the current attempts to recover the doctrine of the church. Not only must we have a beacon in the sea of ideas, we need a crew (and an organized one at that) to navigate our way safely.

### **A Map for Reality**

Of course, many have abandoned the disoriented Protestant fleet and joined in the apparently more stable Armada of Rome or Constantinople. But several [Protestant theologians](#) have argued that we can gain our bearings once again if we but map our surroundings with biblical precision and a willingness to submit to our Captain. It is precisely as a sort of map that Jonathan Leeman conceives of his recent “[Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Role](#).” He writes, “My prayer for this book is that it would give you, the reader, a better understanding of what the Bible says about church as well as how it describes the political map on which the church serves the purposes of Christ's kingdom.” (17) As a map the book is written - and as a map it shall be judged. What follows is a summary of Leeman's ecclesiological proposal, a critical evaluation of several key points, and a conclusion concerning the misunderstood but radical (i.e. “to the root”) nature of historic Protestant ecclesiology at its most basic level.

Leeman begins his tome, "This book has two main goals. The first is to replace the map of politics and religion that many Christians have been using since the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century with a more biblical one. The second is to explain where the local church fits onto this redrawn map as a political institution or embassy of Christ's rule." (13) The more common map is rooted, we are told, in Enlightenment assumptions concerning the "freedom of conscience," and its concomitant, the freedom of religion. In this view, argues Leeman, the political and the religious are separate, corresponding the realms of public and private respectively - the public sphere a realm of politics and the private sphere a realm for conscience and religion. This freedom easily becomes a surrogate for "freedoms" to which most traditional religious persons take umbrage. As an alternative to this, Leeman introduces his own map, in which "church and state are separate institutions with different jurisdictions. Neither should confuse itself for the other. One bears the sword, while the other bears the keys of the kingdom. Yet the work of each is set on a landscape where politics and religion are wholly coterminous, like two circle lenses placed perfectly on top of one another." (14) Leeman, it is important to note, does not hope to persuade unbelievers of his position. Rather, he writes "as a Christian to Christians." (15) "If Christian political theologians or political philosophers try first to convince their non-Christian counterparts even before they convince themselves and their fellow believers, they will have to build on common ground, which invariably means compromising their own foundations." (ibid)

### **Institutions and the Life of the Church**

Leeman descends from global height in his Preface to mountain-top height in his Introduction. And here, one gets a sense of his concerns. "A fundamental assumption of...many democratic Westerners, is that local churches are one more voluntary organization." (21) In contrast, claims Leeman, "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." (22) Again, the "institutional essence of the local assembly is a political unity." (23) Each Christian, by virtue of membership in this political unity, is authorized "to represent the King's name before the nations and their governors as an ambassador." (24) Tellingly, Leeman writes, "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." (ibid)

To approach Leeman's understanding of the church as a political institution, we need, he argues, better concepts of both the "institutional" and the "political." Leeman briefly compares his own maps to other paradigms (two-kingdoms, neo-anabaptists) before summarizing his own starting points. Rather than an attempt to refine one or more tradition, Leeman's method is a "theological method driven by the biblical covenants." (40) He seeks to draw his map in relation to the biblical storyline. His self-described "ontological" starting point for his analysis is, "like Radical Orthodoxy," the Trinity. (40) Epistemologically, "like the post-liberals," we must eschew Enlightenment foundationalism and speak boldly from within the presuppositions we hold to be true (for Leeman, the authority of Scripture). The hermeneutical and institutional implications of this starting point lead Leeman to the following: "The political theology developed in this book will not depend upon an anthropological division, say, between the inner and outer person, or between a religious portion of our lives and a political portion. Rather, it depends on a 'doctrine of the two, or 'doctrine of the two ages' as Oliver O'Donovan has explained it. Institutions like the state and the family have authority over the whole person in one age, within the limits of their mandates; while the church has authority over the whole person for another age, within the limits of its mandate. The state's authority is one of *temporal coercion*; the church's is one of *eschatological declaration*. But both must attend to the inner and outer person. Both are political, and both are spiritual." (51, emphasis in original)

At this point, Leeman moves to "ground-level" to discuss each of his theses in some detail. Six chapters break up neatly into a chapter on politics, on institutions, on the politics of creation, of the fall, of the new covenant, and of the kingdom (followed by a brief conclusion). I will take these in turn.

## **Chapters 1-2: What Does It Mean to be Political?**

Chapter one is concerned to re-orient our thinking concerning what it means for a thing to be "political." According to Leeman, "Politics refers to (1) the institutional activity of governance (2) over an entire population (3) backed by the power of coercion, which in varying degrees will be regarded as legitimate." (62) The latter element (force) "separates a metaphorical use of 'politics' like 'university politics' from a literal one. Hence, we therefore exclude from the discipline of Politics the study of the running of such groups and institutions as businesses, trade unions, schools, universities, banks, churches and families, because in none of them may force play a role except with the permission of the state." (60) The word "may" is important. To wit, "The difference between the power of a band of armed robbers and the power of the state is that the state's power is *authorized*. The state is said to have *authority*, which is the right to do things or to demand that things be done. Authority in the simplest terms is power legitimately exercised." (61, emphasis in original)

Leeman is interested, in relation to this topic, to develop an account of religious tolerance which can be given as a Christian, but “one cannot expect this to be persuasive to non-Christians.” (87) Final authority should not be invested in individual conscience (88), but rather in the limitations which God has placed on the political authorities He has authorized. Leeman argues, nevertheless, that this does not imply either that religion is neutral with respect to the public square or that one cannot employ traditional formulations to argue for religion within the public square. The latter is permissible for pragmatic reasons (93), and the former cannot obtain because the ultimate values of a people will always find a way to publicly assert themselves. Indeed, “government is very much in the business of binding whole persons, included their consciences...A person might be conscientiously convicted that a nation’s immigration laws are unfair, but he or she is still obligated to obey them...His or her conscientious objection is no measure of the law’s legitimacy.” (87) A related irony, we are told, is that it is in the name of “freedom of conscience” that Christian religion will tend to decline (being portrayed as an encroachment upon the consciences of others), which is why it is important for Christians to use their voice in the public square to preserve the platform of the state in a way that is favorable to the strength of the church - which then blesses the state. “All people ‘worship’ in everything they do, whether in public or in private. What institutions do, to oversimplify, is proscribe and prescribe which activities appropriately express that worship in different domains.” (95)

Drawing on a “new institutionalism” in the field of political science, Leeman defines an institution, in his second chapter, as a “behavior-shaping rule structure” (107). They are not to be opposed, as in so much of the anti-institutionalism of the 1960’s, to “community” or to “relationships.” Rather, “institutions are the application of authority to a relationship. Institutions exist wherever two or more individuals relate to one another according to some set of binding principles that commission and constrain the nature of their interactions.” (111) A political institution, then, is a behavior-shaping rule structure whose “reach or jurisdiction extends to the whole body politic (generally, not necessarily) recognized as formally possessing the right to govern it through coercive force.” (112) A political community, then, “is a community of people united by a common governing authority.” (115) Membership in such a community can take the form of being “subjects” (as in a totalitarian regime) or the form of “citizens” (as in those who covenant to submit themselves to a legitimate coercive authority). (125) Importantly, Leeman here develops an “institutional hermeneutic,” which asks of Scripture, “Who is authorized to do what?” (129) This is of major importance for what follows. He writes that “not all imperatives are created equal. And some imperatives - particularly power-conferring imperatives, authorizations and commissions - do possess a kind of primacy in determining our ethical

responsibilities and duties.” (131) The next three chapters ask, then, “who is authorized to do what?” in key passages of Scripture.

### **Chapter 3: The Politics of Creation**

In his third chapter, on the politics of creation, Leeman does not start with Adam, but with God as the Trinity. “If the gospel is political, then it would seem that something about God himself is inherently political. Perhaps his good news is political because something about his very character or being requires it?” (142) God is both one and three, and as three, “there are within God self-conscious encounters between the three persons (unlike Barth, I would even say three subjects) of the Godhead. God has the relational resources within himself to affirm and acknowledge another, another who is, somehow himself.” (146) This is relevant for human politics because “God has a social nature and so do human beings. And politics...is the business of organizing and governing groups of social beings according to a certain concept of righteousness and justice.” (149-50) This structure is manifested in that each person of the Trinity “bears himself toward the others as governed by a shared nature and essence,” (147) as well as the “structured ordering” among the persons themselves. (150)

From here, Leeman launches into a discussion of God’s image-bearers, using his “institutional hermeneutic” to discern whom God has authorized to do what. It is clear, first of all, that God is king over creation. Secondly, however, God authorizes human beings to mediate His authority toward creation. God has authorized mankind in the creation (Genesis 1) and garden (Genesis 2) commissions. And the relationship between mankind and God is indeed an identity-shaping rule structure backed by the threat of force - and therefore a political community. For Leeman, this is a paradigmatic case of authority being “authorized” and therefore “re-presenting” God’s own authority by means of His servants. He writes, therefore, that “every act of human rule is legitimate only if it has been expressly authorized by God and expresses his will.” (162) Adam and Eve were given a task, and were meant to make life on earth “look like life in the divine *polis* of Father, Son and Spirit, a society that spreads beyond all time and space.” (ibid, emphasis in original) Adam and Eve were *subjects* of God’s kingdom but participated in His rule as its *citizens*.

One implication which Leeman draws out of this is that “a tension will inevitably exist in a fallen world between the absolute obligation to obey God and the relative obligation to obey any human authority that he has authorized.” (169) Luther’s injunction that it is neither right nor safe to go against conscience must be balanced by its inverse, “to go against parent or prince for the sake of conscience just might not be right or safe either.” (ibid) “God does in fact authorize various individuals and institutions to place burdens on

the conscience.” (ibid) One might “rightly decide that the obligations of submission to the authority in question outweigh his assessment of the situation at hand.” (170) When this is the case and when it is not is very much a matter of wisdom.

#### **Chapter 4: The Politics of the Fall**

This ambiguity forms a perfect segue into Leeman’s discussion of the “politics of the fall” in chapter four. The fall is “the grand complexifier for any theological account of politics.” (172) The fall creates a complicated situation in which God remains king over all of creation, and yet within which His reign is not recognized explicitly by His subjects. Hereafter, while God’s rule remains invisibly universal, He makes it manifest in His “particular” relation to His people. There is a difference, then, between God’s single rule in its invisible dimension and in its “visible manifestation.” (181) The former is enshrined in the Noahic covenant, and the latter is enshrined in the “special covenants” between God and His people (culminating in the new covenant). Within the Noahic covenant, Leeman identifies what he terms a “justice mechanism,” an authorization of mankind to deal with violence, and by implication, matters pertaining to self-preservation. “The inevitable and unavoidable implication of these two verses is that groups of people living in society *must* form or support a government - an orderly set of publicly recognized institutional processes - in order to employ this God-given justice mechanism justly.” (188, emphasis in original) That the state is not authorized to demand true worship is because such a demand is not a part of its divine charter. Religious freedom need not be argued on the foundation of free conscience (201), but rather in the fact that God has “not authorized human beings to prosecute crimes against himself.” (ibid) Leeman does make a case for revolution when a “government systematically defies the justice mechanism and falls under its condemnation.” (203) And indeed, governments have an interest in “ascertaining...right doctrine and in some sense submitting itself to it” (204) precisely because false worship and idolatry will easily lead to such systematic defiance. “In short, a Christian’s description of the public square depends upon embracing two principles that bear a measure of tension between them: government must tolerate false religions, and following a false religion will eventually make a government unjust.” (ibid) If, however, none of this is persuasive to the unbeliever, how should Christians hold back injustice against themselves in a public square that does not recognize their first principles? Leeman responds, “use whatever arguments work!” (205)

The nations are subject to God’s authorization in the Noahic covenant. To wit, “Through the common covenants given to Adam and Noah, God commands all his *subjects* to act as his *citizens*, his ruled rulers. They do not. So God establishes a series of special covenants to call out a people who will embody this citizenship, modeling what God intended for all

humanity.” (215) At this point, Leeman traces the history of God’s special covenants in the Old Testament. In the Mosaic economy, crimes which could not be punished under Noah (idolatry) could now be punished because God’s comprehensive rule was there exemplified (226). Leeman makes much of the distinction between “delegated” and “deputized” authority in the Mosaic polity. A department head of a company possesses a delegated authority to perform a certain function within a company (on behalf of the CEO). But the department head is not a stand-in for the CEO. “A lawyer, on the other hand, can be deputized to act *on behalf* of the CEO” (ibid, emphasis in original). This distinction helps us to further see the line between the common and special covenants. “Those who possess authority under the common covenants (parents, governments) do indeed represent God’s authority, but they represent him like a delegate might...But God has not attached his own name to every parent and to every prince in quite the same way as he does with the people of Israel.” (227) Israel bears God’s name and are “specially authorized to act in his name.” (ibid) Special covenants represent God’s “visibly mediated rule” with common covenants represent God’s “invisibly mediated rule.” (ibid) Tellingly, “the distinction in space between ‘my people’ and ‘not my people’ signifies an institutional difference.” (230)

## **Chapter 5: The Politics of the New Covenant**

In his penultimate fifth chapter, Leeman follows the biblical storyline into the prophetic heralding of the “politics of the new covenant.” Interestingly, he argues that since God “gives the new covenant community what he commands...coercive force is unnecessary within the new covenant.” (257) This is an important point for Leeman, because the new covenant community is still a political community, but it is a community of those who affirm God’s rule over them. This is his critique of Christendom. “By conflating national citizenship and church membership, Christendom formally affirmed people as Christians in whom the Spirit had not moved.” (262) In the new covenant, God creates the example of true community for a watching world that Israel failed to be. As such, “Christians should rest their hopes for true justice and righteousness not upon the state but upon the son of David and the political community that he is forming.” (267) Here Leeman spends a good deal of time clarifying the institutional boundaries of the church and the state. Even if a state governor were a Christian, “he or she must still refrain from taking up the sword *for new covenant purposes*.” (273, emphasis in original) Both church and state are concerned with body and soul, but one as comprehended in “this age” with its specific charter and limitations, and the other as comprehended in “the age to come” with its specific charter and limitations. “One age and its rulers are passing; the other is not.” (275) And again, “both ages possess their own institutional authorities. The creation age possesses marriage, the family and the state. The eschatological age possesses the church and ordained elders.” (ibid) The church possesses authority over the “new self as it can be discerned in the whole

person” and the state possesses authority over the “old self...as it can be discerned in the whole person.” (277) Nevertheless, the overlap of the ages means that the institutions of the age to come serve those of this age by example and influence. Yet, “In their best moments, the kingdoms of this world reach for justice and sometimes even offer a glimmer of it. In the new covenant community alone will true righteousness and justice be found.” (278) This is largely because it is only in the new covenant that true political forgiveness and restoration to Adamic office and citizenship is realized. Here it a citizenship in which rebellion is identified, repented of, forgiven, and the subject restored to office and obedience.

## **Chapter 6: The Politics of the Kingdom**

Leeman’s final (sixth) chapter, on the politics of the kingdom, is certainly the most important chapter in the book. It’s opening is worth quoting at length: “The argument of this book, in several sentences, is that the local church and its members constitute a political community that exists according to Jesus’ explicit authorization in Matthew 16, 18, and 28. In fact, since it is this authorization that gives the local church existence, we have to say that an essential element of the local church is its political structure, without which there is no local church. The purpose of this political community, then is to publicly represent King Jesus, display the justice and righteousness of the triune God, and pronounce that all the world belongs to this King. His claim is universal.” (294)

A large portion of this chapter expands upon the metaphor of the local church as an “embassy” of God’s kingdom. Local church membership is like a “passport” for the Christian. (295) To wit, “embassies do not make people citizens of a home nation, but they do formally affirm who is and who is not a citizen of the home nation.” (296) The local church, however “is not an embassy representing another nation from across geographic space. It represents another nation from across time - from the future.” (ibid) Though I will not focus on it here, Leeman spends a good bit of time (particularly in Matthew’s gospel) detailing the manner in which Christ fulfills the citizenship mandate of Adam and restores man to the Adamic office. He follows up on this with a discussion of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, which he argues is “history’s unexpected ground of political unity.” (325) Why? Because justification frees the self from the need for self-justification and idolatry, and therefore makes a community of love and forgiveness possible - a community not governed by negotiating and winning status for the sake of an elusive identity, but an extra-spective community which already has secure status and can therefore live in its neighbor. But Leeman follows this analysis with the query: “If salvation, justification and the creation of a just body politic comes through the new covenant, why is anything more needed for establishing outposts of Christ’s kingdom on earth?...God’s word

creates God's people. As such, you can have the universal church - meaning Christians - alive and well on planet earth even though no ecclesial authority recognizes it as such. What's more, a believer *is* at this moment a new creation, born again, a son, a priest-king. Why is anything more needed?" (332) To these questions, he replies, "The short answer is, the member's of Christ's body politic still need to be publicly recognized and affirmed as a body politic; they need the assurance of their belonging; they need to be authorized in the work of the body politic or kingdom; and they need to agree upon an authoritative interpretation of the gospel and Scripture." (ibid) A body politic needs a visible "glue" (ibid) and a nation needs some way of helping to form a "we" for insiders and a "they" for outsiders. (333) Again, "A person is included in the universal church through salvation. Yet at this point the church remains an abstract idea without a palpable and public presence. A second constitutive moment is needed in order for 'the church' to show up on planet earth. For this to happen, a group of Christians must gather and organize themselves (or be organized) as a congregation and affirm one another as believers." (ibid)

Leeman argues that the famous "keys" of Matthew 16 and the "binding and loosing" re-mentioned in Matthew 18 represent Jesus' deputizing the church to publicly affirm the doctrines of the gospel (and heresy) and the faith (or lack thereof) of people who claim that gospel. For Leeman, this is (again) deputized authority. It is as though Jesus says "my presence and authority is with them such that this church speaks on my behalf." (346-7) Matthew 28 is the moment in which Christ deputizes the church to speak in His name, particularly by giving it the affirming mark of "baptism" through which it then publicly affirms the faith of its members and, on His behalf, deputizes them to participate in corporately representing Him. Leeman spends some time covering the "congregationalist" ground, defending a moderate congregationalism (albeit led by elders). Interestingly, he argues that congregational authority binds and looses "now," whereas elder authority is "backed by a *heavenly and end-time sanction*. Disobey your elders within the arena of their authority, and you will have to deal with Jesus' displeasure *on the last day*." (357, emphasis in original) The congregation can force someone in and out of a church, but elders cannot. Their authority is declarative and they "can place biblical burdens on the conscience of their hearers by virtue of their office, but they cannot enforce, force or demand something." (358) If the burden is unbiblical or unwise, however, Jesus will have words for the elders (ibid), and Jesus Himself is the only final authority. Still, He commands the congregation to "exercise its key-holding authority *in submission to* the elders." (359, emphasis in original)

Because the church speaks for God, it also has authority to declare to the nations what God affirms and what He abhors - based upon its authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures. It is precisely because of the ministry of the keys that Leeman argues that individual Christians must be very careful what they attach to the name of Christ in the political realm.

He reaffirms a pragmatism as it pertains the public square (385) but argues that there are moments wherein a moral issue is clear enough that the church may speak on behalf of Christ about the matter.

Leeman finishes with a discussion of the political unity to be found in the local church, a “visible political unity” (385). Indeed, Christians who do not attend the same church share a “spiritual unity,” but nevertheless do not participate in one’s binding and loosing “on earth.” (386) It is in this community that true society is found. “The state...has been thrust into a peripheral role. God’s Genesis 1:28 citizenship mandate has been fulfilled in Christ and will be accomplished in the church.” (387) Leeman concludes the book, “The political hopes of the world should rest on the local church - in its life together. Here the pardoning word of the gospel is spoken, and the obedience-giving power of the Spirit is applied. The warfare of the nations begins to end here. It’s a different kind of politics, to be sure. It is the politics of aliens, strangers and unwelcome immigrants. It is a politics that expects, even embraces, persecution (Mt. 5:10-12). Still, the hope of the nations is to be placed here - in this society gathered around a King who has laid down his life for the world. It is those who have submitted themselves to this crucified King who, in turn, lay down their lives for one another and beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” (387)

### **Critical Assessment**

Leeman’s tome is a massive undertaking, and even the above summary does not quite fully capture all the nuances, sub-discussions, and detailed interaction with various other ecclesial proposals. There are many helpful aspects of his work, particularly in relation to other proposals (the neo-two kingdom’s school of David Van Drunen) and on some exegetical/theological matters - such as the full scope of Paul’s doctrine of justification and Matthew’s vision of the kingdom of God. Space and reader exhaustion demand, however, that I focus upon those areas which I deem either deeply ambiguous or overtly problematic.

### **The Failures of Leeman’s Map**

Most basically, while Leeman’s map might provide guidance in the context of certain discussions, it nevertheless frequently fails to accurately chart reality at its most stubborn edges - and will therefore mislead in some very important areas. That this is the most basic objection reflects a particular theological orientation. If one’s interpretation of the Bible appears to distort the way in which reality is carved up right in front of one’s face, then there is some question about whether the word of God (which illuminates our work and our world) has been properly understood. Reasoning in such a manner is both as natural as

human nature (Leeman does it too) - and indeed [it is reflected in Scripture itself](#). When the Psalmist writes, for instance, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:13), it is assumed that the normal experience of fatherhood illuminates divine fatherhood. The prophetic and Pauline critique of idolatry similarly assume the "obviousness" of their contentions. And in this tradition, it is to reality that we must go to judge Leeman's map - for icebergs exist in reality whether or not they are accounted for in our imagination.

Specifically, Leeman constantly camps on principles which must then be adjusted to actually fit the phenomenon of actual church life. On the one hand, we are told that political institutions are backed by the power of force, and that the church is just such an institution. However, we are then told that the church does not, as such, have coercive power but is "backed by one who does." This is, of course, completely disanalogous with the sort of coercion that exists in a state. When the church speaks falsely, it is no more backed by the power of the final judgment than are the threats of a cult. And when it speaks rightly, it is no more backed by the threat of divine judgment than when an individual Christian speaks the truth. Whatever one's theory demands them to say, all Protestant theologians (including Leeman) must concede that this is true *in fact*, in which case there is a question of what the *principle* is actually getting us. Another example of this is Leeman's insistence that to disobey church elders is backed by the threat of divine judgment unless, of course, they are wrongly placing burdens on the conscience. Once again, what concrete difference does the principle make? If the church elders declare that an unrepentant adulterer is right with God (which does happen) and I declare that he is not - who is then speaking for Christ? And what does one's office have to do with it? The only eschatological difference-maker in this instance is the Word of God and the truth - which is either rightly spoken or it is not.

### **The Crypto-Romanism of Leeman's Ecclesiology**

I will deal with more specifics in relation to other points below, but it is worth highlighting the parallel of the above to the Roman Catholic definition of the church. Whatever the substantive differences between Leeman's proposal of the local church as a political community and an embassy of Christ's kingdom, Leeman's proposal has a material overlap with certain Roman Catholic principles in that it holds that the body of Christ is institutional as such. Leeman is somewhat inconsistent on this point, since he seems to root the institutional nature of the church both in the very fact of God as a political entity - but also in "could have been otherwise" practical realities (i.e. that the church needs to become identified in history). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Roman Catholic theology makes the very same sorts of "adjustments" to its first principles in dealing with the

anomalies of the Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, those who have never heard of Christ, and those who have heard the gospel but have no contact with or knowledge of the Roman magisterium. On the one hand, this could be perceived as a strength, as the ability of a paradigm to “incorporate” all of the phenomenon. And yet, arguably, the proliferation of anomalies is an indication that the paradigm has missed the mark and must constantly adjust to fit what is actually in front of one’s face. As will be argued below, the genius of the most basic Protestant ecclesiological principles is that the anomalies are incorporated into the first principles themselves - and in such a way that the diverse phenomenon of reality and of Scripture become elegantly illuminated and quite naturally accounted for.

### **The Deeply Modern Nature of Leeman’s Project**

Essential to this basic error is Leeman’s alleged “anti-modern” philosophical posture - which is ironically *deeply modern*! We are told, indeed, that believers and unbelievers cannot do political philosophy together because they do not share basic principles in common. We are told that his argument could not be persuasive to an unbeliever, and are correspondingly advised to defer to more pragmatic argumentation in the public sphere. The problem is that, despite protests to the contrary, this move necessarily and irreducibly makes the human subject to be the creator of reality, indeed, the ultimate authority. Reality itself is effectively silenced in its adjudicating role of confronting and revealing itself to human beings in a common manner. [I have criticized this sort of thinking before](#). In all its iterations, it is demonstrably modern and, as hinted at above, unlivable - since reality confronts us still and we adjust to it still. For instance, Leeman obviously believes that there are Reformed Baptist unbelievers. How do his theses apply to them? Presumably some of them will read his book and agree with it. Once again, his map has not entirely misled us, but it must be adjusted to actually account for what is happening. And this adjustment must nevertheless falsify the principle. To wit, believers and unbelievers do not necessarily have different philosophical or epistemic starting points. They have different *loves*. This might regularly shape their explicit philosophy, but that it does not necessarily do so suggests that Christian claims can be persuasive in themselves. Being persuaded that they are true will not cause the new birth any more than being persuaded that “God is one” will convert the demons. But what these rarities suggest is precisely that explicit Christian claims and principles are not to be traded for pragmatism in the public sphere. Suspended as they are atop the reality that commonly confronts all humans, when understood and imbibed, they contain an innate *gravitas* which inevitably echoes in the soul of the person made in God’s image. This is not to imply that such a task is easy. It takes a lifetime for even the initiated and inclined to fully appreciate Christian truth. It often takes generations and centuries for the same to shape an often reluctant public.

## Skepticism and Biblicism

In any case, this philosophical skepticism necessitates the corresponding biblicism which then must make up for the presumable lack of clarity in reality itself. In such a case, what Leeman terms an “institutional hermeneutic” might seem natural - though it is exegetically awkward. Not, of course, that the human task is not illuminated in Genesis 1 or the task of the state illuminated in Genesis 9, but it is precisely normal human reality that these illuminate. These texts can be read as “origins” stories of our normal experiences (and to some extent they are), but their import is not, “That’s why I’m allowed to do that,” but rather, “That’s where this thing that I already do came from and what it is for.” The problem with Leeman’s picture is that nature cannot be “authorizing” by itself. He states many times that political institutions must be *explicitly* authorized by God and have very specific charters. It is important to highlight this move, because without it, his entire ideological edifice falls apart. And yet note what its necessary implication would be. Most cultures have had little sense of what their political structures, or their experience of marrying and giving in marriage, have to do with Adam and Noah. Presumably, this does not mean that they are not authorized to do these things, but it does imply that they don’t *know* that they are authorized to do these things. And this would seem to lead to the absurd conclusion that they, in fact, should *not* do these things. There is probably a fine-grained distinction to be made here which might avoid such a conclusion, but it is difficult to imagine how it might avoid the awkward impression that we have taken a wrong turn somewhere. A far more obvious and natural read of both reality and of these biblical texts is simply that marriage and political communities arise from human nature - and that these are their origins stories. Human beings find themselves naturally organizing into various sorts of communities in various sorts of contexts, and naturally joining together as man and wife. And they find themselves doing this because humans are made to do this. God then inspires His word to speak into those already lived realities and reveal to us their relationship to His creation, His larger goals, and His purposes. The point to emphasize, however, is “Doth not *nature itself* teach you that, sans marriage and the state, we are a shame unto ourselves?”

This more reciprocal relationship between Scripture and nature will become more important below. But it is interesting, for the moment, to note an exception to this trend in Leeman’s thinking - specifically, in his definitions of politics, institutions, and especially of the human conscience. His definition of politics is extremely specific to the point of speaking about “university politics” as metaphorical. Though not an expert in this field, this strikes me as definition by fiat. It is also interesting to note, in the context, the frequent contrast of “the church” to the more “voluntary organizations” (on which, again, see below). This is another example of failing to chart reality at its edges, because Leeman is forced to

admit that the church may phenomenologically be described in this manner (people join and leave at will), but this also fails to see political institutions as on a sort of spectrum. There are, in fact, many interesting organizations in-between a 4H Club and Leeman's definition of a "political institution." There are Alcoholics Anonymous chapters, and martial arts schools, and neighborhoods. These are not trivial institutions and the bonds developed therein are quite powerful. The "politics" of going and staying are quite similar to the "politics" of joining or leaving a church. Leeman's definition of "institution" is, by contrast, so broad as to be trivial. Plenty of people criticize a certain sort of institutionalism. But very few people have a problem with an "identity shaping rule structure." One fears that Leeman's affirmations do not link up to his interlocutor's denials - though we are given the impression that they are supposed to. Perhaps most idiosyncratic is Leeman's implicit definition of "conscience," which I will deal with in a moment.

### **Leeman's Treatment of the Power of the Keys**

The theological heart of Leeman's text is his treatment of Matthew, 16, 18, and 28. The subject of the "keys of the kingdom," the nature of "binding" and "loosing," and the corresponding concept of "church power" are perhaps beyond the purview of this review. Briefly, much of what Leeman says about these matters could be true in one sense and not in another. Fascinatingly, however, he does not see the grammatical "future passive participles" of Matthew 16 ("shall have been bound" vs "shall be bound") as particularly significant. And yet, from a Protestant perspective, this is essential because it roots the power of the church in the power of the word. Only inasmuch as the church reflects the word does it have spiritual power. When it fails to speak the word, it does not speak for Christ or with His authority and power - whether it claims to do so or not. And once this relation is clear, it becomes obvious that the authority that Jesus gives the church is simply declaratory. It is to "teach all that I have commanded you." It is to bind and loose according to what is already in heaven. And yet here we see a sort of awkward element to Leeman's "institutional hermeneutic." If the power of binding and loosing is just the power of the word, then its relationship to institutions is as ambiguous as the actual texts themselves (again, because they speak to the real world). Binding and loosing can apparently be done by Peter (Matthew 16), by a congregation (Matthew 18), and by the whole body of Christ as such (Matthew 28). Why? Because an individual Christian, an individual congregation, and the body of Christ as a whole can speak the word of God concerning a truth or concerning a person. This will take a different form at different levels, but the relation to the word and therefore the "spiritual power" exercised are one and the same - though their social and political manifestation may differ.

To explicate this further, let us examine Leeman's image of the local church as a "citizenship affirming" embassy of an eschatological community. Is it? Perhaps the analogy is useful in some respect, but there is a significant point of discontinuity. Because the eschatological embassy only speaks on behalf of the word, and because all men may also have an immediate relationship with that Word, each person stands in immediate relation both to the embassy and to the very Person and kingdom which that embassy represents. The embassy does not stand "in-between" the host nation and the citizen. Rather, the relationship of the citizen or of the would-be citizen to both is immediate. And so, the authority of the embassy is exercised in the very presence of the King who works above and alongside it. If the embassy says one is not a citizen, but the Bible says one is, the embassy does not speak for the King. What is more, the world can, in principle, evaluate the veracity of the embassy's claims because the word is as public as the institution which (at another level) mediates it.

[I have written more extensively about the place of the local church within this vision elsewhere.](#) One area to highlight here, however, is the relationship of the believer to the state. Leeman writes insightfully of the manner in which Christians exemplify true community to the world, but this is not something that is simply true of local churches. This is also true of believers who do not belong to the same local church. And it is true of believers who work together in secular organizations. While certainly these organizations (and the state) have a different function than the function of the local church, the latter is not an entirely different "sort" of institution. In fact, local churches will pass away in the eschaton just as will human embassies. The love between two Christian co-workers who attend different local churches, *a love which can be seen by the world*, will not pass away. It would be better to say that while the local church as an institution will pass away, the identity therein celebrated will not - though arguably neither will our identities as male and female and even our distinctive national identities (note Revelation 5 and Revelation 21-22). I think the most that can be said here is that we ideally participate in the local church by virtue of our eschatological identity whereas we participate in all other institutions by virtue of our "this age" identities. Nevertheless, (a) the actual mechanics of the local church as an institution are like those of many other institutions (as are many of its immediate concerns), and (b) a large part of the goal of Christ's kingdom is to redeem our "this age" identities (the substance of which is glorified and carried on into eternity) - which occurs at all levels wherein the word is influential.

It is, of course, understandable why Leeman speaks the way he does. Individualism and spiritual "islandism" are a real problem in the West. This is the era of the "spiritual but not religious," who "love Jesus, but not the institutional church." Arguably, however, to address this problem by emphasizing the institutional character of the church fails to properly

diagnose the spiritual malaise of our era. Our problem is not merely that we're "too individualistic," such that what we need is to be "less individualistic." The problem could just as much be identified with the type of "individualist" that we are. The irony therein revealed would be that we're actually nothing of the sort. We're "individualists" because we have imbibed the kool-aid of personal fulfillment, maximized temporal pleasure, brands, identity politics, self-fulfillment, shallow modes of agency, and have been heralded to worship our own "freedom from restraint." The call to wisdom in this context is not merely the call to see the necessity of community, our social nature, the gift of "others," or to deny that the local church is largely a "voluntary association." It is rather a call to actual individuality rather than its surrogate. Jumping from church to church and thereby treating the local body like an item in the buffet line reflects a shallow *identity*, shaped ironically in a *mass* consumerist fashion, to think only in terms of "me" and "my needs" and "my desires." Leeman's explication of Paul's doctrine of justification is apt here. In being united to Christ by faith, we are given a communal *and an individual* identity that no man can take from us. And we are freed to a life of service which is in accordance with our formed desires. In one sense, our call is not to "stop being so individualistic," but to be more radically individualistic - the mature form of which necessarily terminates in living for one's community and in their neighbor. Without this, we will simply exchange one vice for another - a communitarian bondage which surrenders our own epistemic and moral responsibility for our bondage to individualistic self-expression (which is really a bondage to others' affirmation). In other words, justification both creates individuals and a body which mutually reinforce one another as grounded in a secure identity that pushes them outside of themselves for the other. Especially in our world, nothing could be more radically individualistic than to choose the difficult life of a community which will hurt the individual and which will require forgiveness - or more communitarian than a community receiving an individual who will hurt them and who will require the extension of their forgiveness.

### **The Problem with Church as Polis Theologies**

That this communitarian pendulum swing can be a form of bondage is put in refrain when we look at the actual history of "church as polis" theologies that have existed before Leeman's proposal. If a sort of shallow individualism is rife with embarrassing and insecure attempts to legitimate one's self to an imaginary public, then its communitarian alter-ego is rife with a history of people who do not learn to exercise critical judgment and leaders who unwittingly (even with good motivations) support the dynamics that grow spiritual children rather than spiritual adults. This is especially dangerous in light of Leeman's statement concerning the church's authority over the "whole person" (body and soul) as that person is comprehended in the new age. Once again, we must ask what this means in

reality. Deciding what belongs to the old age and what belongs to the new age can be quite tricky. And slight adjustments, then, to the “charter” of the state versus the “charter” of the church then have massive practical implicates. For instance, Leeman puts cases of “child abuse” in the hands of the state rather than the church. (45, n. 90) But what principles determine this line? Presumably, property law belongs to the state (being a concern of “this age” flourishing and self-preservation), but is dispute over property not precisely the sort of thing that Paul would have believers not bring to the state? (1 Corinthians 6) Of course, cases of child abuse should be brought to the public authorities, but I mean to highlight the danger of drawing the line at specifically delineated charters - the logical algorithm of which is almost always involved in “cover-up” scandals. Rather, the New Testament seems to operate on the far more basic principle of love as artfully refracted through the much less basic filter of wisdom. In this case, what wrongs are loving for me to suffer and to work through privately with my fellow believer? And conversely, which wrongs are unloving for me to suffer with privately - but are most lovingly treated as matters of public interest?

Taking stock of all of the above, I would summarize thus: The authority of the church (whether represented by an individual, a local congregation, or the body of Christ throughout the world) is the authority of the word. And the word enters and illuminates reality as it commonly confronts us. Leeman is addressing real problems. But both their diagnosis and their antidote is to be found in a Scriptural map of reality that corresponds to the world as we actually live in it. When these are put together, I would argue that there is an innate *gravitas* (the *gravitas* of the Word) which does its work even apart from regeneration (Isaiah 55:11). It is the echo in the soul of man whose heart is created as a cavern for God’s word. One might reject the Word, but cannot trivialize it.

### **Scripture and Reality Belong Together**

I think it would be appropriate to conclude with another illustration of how Scripture and reality work together seamlessly. One of the issues that Leeman addresses thoroughly in his volume is the topic of religious freedom. And a significant portion of his text is spent arguing that religious freedom, for Christians, need not be argued on the basis of a “free conscience” but rather on the basis of the limitation of the state’s charter. He argues that Luther’s “to go against conscience is neither right nor safe” needs supplementation. He argues that both states and churches bind consciences. In point of fact, this is an extremely problematic definition of “conscience” which results in a dialectic of Leeman’s own making. For Luther, “conscience” is not just “my own personal preferences” or even “my own personal convictions,” though it is closer to the latter. Most immediately, the free conscience is the immediate relation that one has to God which cannot be accessed by men. This is not to say that states and despots don’t try. The history of the human race is a

history of social engineers, psychological manipulation, the force of threat or persuasion to follow a certain path, etc. But ultimately, the conscience cannot be forced. It is free in relation to God, and this was brought into stark relief in the Reformation. Not only was it in fact free as a *faculty*, it was declared free in relation to guilt because of God's justifying declaration. But here's the point. *The free conscience is simply reality!* Even Rome had to recognize that it could not "force" the conscience. The genius of Protestant political theology was simply that this became a self-conscious principle of governance - integrated into its starting point for thinking about these matters. In other words, the limitation of the government charter is a limitation rooted in nature itself, a nature wherein the conscience is free in relation to God and in which God alone can *ultimately* bind and loose it in relation to Himself. And so the argument for religious freedom on account of the free conscience and from the limited charter of government are not different accounts of religious freedom. The limited charter of the government is simply a function of government limiting itself to what it can access in the first place (i.e. pen-ultimate things) *qua* reality.

Much more could be said, especially concerning Leeman's treatment of the [new covenant](#), infant baptism (see my essay in [this volume](#)), and concerning his extremely problematic treatment of Trinitarian "subjects" (for which, see [here](#)). But I believe that I have addressed matters of first importance above. While often bedeviled by parasitic spandrels, the very essence of Protestant ecclesiology - its radical insight - is that the church's spiritual power is only the power of the word and that the believer's access to this word is immediate. The implications of this insight for a doctrine of the visible church are momentous and, let it be noted again, illuminate reality as it actually confronts us (See [Brad Littlejohn's recent work on the theology of Richard Hooker](#) for an excellent statement of Protestant ecclesiological essentials at their most basic and consistent). It is gravely important that this clarity of principle is preserved, because confusion in this area will inevitably bleed into other areas of doctrine and life. It is not coincidental that many recent converts to Rome come from the portion(s) of the evangelical community which tend to treat the church as a political institution with a vaguely defined "spiritual power." And it is not coincidental that churches which hold to these sorts of ecclesiological formulas often wind up with all sorts of intra-community "obligations" which comfort the competitive but discourage the weak. In this area, failure to make proper distinctions is doctrinally and pastorally perilous. The antidote to the malaise of modern community is not a baptized "new institutionalism," but a recovery of historically orthodox and Protestant first principles - the roots of which grow in the soil of persuasion and produce the fruit of Christian love.