Kiss the Son, Promote Piety

The Political Obligations of Nations toward Christ and His Church

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I. Introduction: The Challenge and the Claim

One of the most persistent questions in modern political theology is whether the New Testament leaves any place for the public recognition of Christ by political authority. Are rulers accountable to Christ as rulers, or only as private individuals? Does the coming of Christ transform political authority into a religiously neutral institution concerned only with maintaining social order?

A growing stream within modern Reformed theology answers that it does. Often described under the rubric of "Reformed Two Kingdoms" or "Modern Two Kingdoms," this framework argues that the New Testament fundamentally reconfigures the relation between political authority and true religion—removing, rather than establishing, any civil obligation toward Christ's kingship. Civil government is located within a "common" order shared by all humanity, ordered to the preservation of temporal peace and justice rather than to the advancement of Christ's redemptive reign. Its task is therefore protective rather than directive: to maintain external order, not to promote or uphold true religion.

On this reading, Christianity itself is understood as essentially non-political in its public claims. The church's mission is spiritual and eschatological, while political authority is limited to temporal concerns. Civil rulers remain legitimate and necessary, but their responsibilities do not include acknowledging Christ's kingship or honoring the church as the public community through which his reign is made manifest.

This framework rests on two pillars, not one. The first is a New Testament claim: that Christ's coming removes any civil obligation toward true religion. The second is an Old Testament claim: that even Israel's political responsibilities were unique to her covenantal vocation and were never assigned to Gentile nations. On this reading, prophetic summonses to rulers—such as the command to "kiss the Son" (Ps 2:10–12)—are interpreted either as poetic expressions of divine sovereignty or as eschatological ideals, not as descriptions of political obligations binding upon nations in history.

Against this separationist reading, the magisterial Protestant tradition consistently interpreted Scripture differently. Reformed theologians did not regard political responsibility toward true religion as limited to Israel, nor did they believe the New Testament abolished such responsibility. Drawing on the prophetic literature, the Psalms, and apostolic teaching—especially Psalm 2, Psalm 72, Isaiah 49 and 60, and 1 Timothy 2—they argued that political rulers, as rulers, remain accountable to Christ's universal kingship. The command to pray for rulers "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" was historically understood not as a counsel of quietism but as an affirmation that civil peace serves the church's public worship and witness, and that civil rulers bear a duty to protect and support true religion.

This paper challenges both pillars of the separationist argument. I will argue, first, that the Old Testament itself presents Gentile nations—not only Israel—as corporate moral subjects accountable to God, judged for their posture toward his anointed king, his sanctuary, and his people. Second, that the New Testament does not abolish this prophetic political theology but fulfills and transposes it around Christ and the church. And third, that the Reformed tradition, from Bucer and Calvin through the Reformed scholastics and into the nineteenth century, read these texts together as binding political theology—concluding that magistrates bear duties toward true religion as part of their charge to secure peaceful and pious public life.

My thesis is simple: political communities are corporate moral subjects accountable to Christ. Nations and their rulers are judged when they fail these duties and blessed when they fulfill them—an outcome earlier theologians understood as the fulfillment of prayer and prophecy.

Let me show first how the Old Testament frames this question.

II. The Prophetic Framework: Nations as Moral Subjects

We will focus first on the prophetic literature. A word on method: I include the Psalms within this prophetic framework, since the New Testament explicitly identifies David as a prophet and consistently interprets the psalms as prophetic proclamation of Christ's kingship over nations and rulers.

The prophetic literature of the Old Testament begins not with Israel but with God. Psalm 24:1 states the premise: “The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Because the earth belongs to the LORD, political authority is never ultimate or autonomous. It exists within a prior order it did not create and cannot escape. The psalm ends with a dramatic political summons: “Lift up your heads, O gates, that the King of glory may come in” (Ps 24:7). The King who enters is not merely Israel's tribal deity but the universal sovereign before whom all earthly rulers must yield.

What follows in the prophetic literature is a sustained demonstration that nations—not only Israel—are corporate moral subjects accountable to God. The prophets address the nations as nations. Isaiah summons them to hear the divine indictment (Isa 34:1–2). Jeremiah pronounces judgment on Egypt, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Babylon (Jer 46–51). Ezekiel devotes extended oracles to Ammon, Tyre, and Egypt (Ezek 25–32). These judgments do not treat foreign nations merely as collections of morally responsible individuals. They treat them as corporate political entities—and they judge them according to identifiable theological criteria.

Let me briefly identify five of these criteria, because they matter for understanding what the New Testament does and does not revoke. Taken together, these highlight the duty of nations to order their common life toward the fear of the Lord—that is, toward public piety.

First, nations are judged for refusing to acknowledge the LORD. Babylon is condemned for its proud declaration: “I am, and there is no one besides me” (Isa 47:8). The prince of Tyre is

judged for claiming divinity (Ezek 28:2). Political rebellion against God is not merely personal but corporate.

Second, nations are judged for violating God's moral order. Psalm 82 condemns rulers: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?" (Ps 82:2). Isaiah declares the earth defiled because its inhabitants have broken "the everlasting covenant" (Isa 24:5). Political injustice is a theological offense.

Third, nations are judged for profaning God's sanctuary. The psalmist laments, "O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple" (Ps 79:1), and Ezekiel pronounces judgment on those who exult over its profanation (Ezek 25:3–7). In Jeremiah 51, the LORD declares that he will destroy Babylon as "vengeance for his temple" (Jer 51:11; cf. 51:51). Babylon's judgment is not attributed solely to general injustice or imperial aggression, but specifically to its desecration of the sanctuary—the visible sign of God's dwelling among his people. Belshazzar's downfall in Daniel 5 is directly tied to his desecration of the temple vessels. Rulers are accountable for how they treat what God has set apart as the public sign of his presence among his people.

Fourth, nations are judged for their treatment of God's covenant people. Joel declares: "I will gather all the nations… and I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people" (Joel 3:2). Zechariah explains the underlying logic: "He who touches you touches the apple of his eye" (Zech 2:8). Political communities are judged according to their posture toward God's people—and may be incorporated into blessing when they honor them (Isa 19:19–25).

Fifth—and this is what the separationist account most conspicuously omits—nations are judged for rejecting God's anointed king. Psalm 2 addresses kings directly: "Now therefore, O kings, be wise… Serve the LORD with fear… Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way" (Ps 2:10–12). Psalm 72 declares: "May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him" (Ps 72:11). Daniel's vision confirms the scope: "To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan 7:14).

Seen together, these judgments are not random or episodic. They presuppose a positive standard: that nations, as nations, are called to live within an order oriented toward the knowledge, worship, and fear of the Lord. Where that order is rejected—whether through idolatry, injustice, or hostility to God's people—Scripture names the result for what it is: not merely political failure, but impiety at the level of public life.

The prophetic vision is not only one of judgment, however. It is also one of instruction and nurture. Isaiah and Micah envision a future in which nations seek instruction from God's people: "All nations shall flow to it… that he may teach us his ways" (Isa 2:2–3). And the prophetic imagery reaches its most concrete political form in Isaiah 49:23: "Kings shall be your nursing fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers." This image of rulers as nursing fathers—protective, nurturing, sustaining—came to signify the positive duty of political authority toward the people of God. Isaiah reinforces the stakes: "The nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish" (Isa 60:12). Political authority is not autonomous but accountable: rulers fulfill their

vocation by serving the community through whom God makes himself known among the nations.

This, in condensed form, represents key elements of the prophetic framework. It does not confine political accountability to Israel. Nations as nations are summoned, judged, instructed, and warned.

This prophetic framework raises an unavoidable interpretive question. If the Old Testament presents nations as corporate moral subjects accountable to God—summoned to honor his anointed king and judged for their treatment of his people—what becomes of that political theology in the New Testament? Does the coming of Christ dissolve these obligations, confining them to Israel's unique covenantal history? Or does it fulfill and reconfigure them around the Messiah and the community united to him? The separationist account answers the first question in the affirmative: the political summons of the prophets is treated as either poetic or eschatological, not as binding upon nations in history. The New Testament itself, however, suggests a different conclusion.

III. The New Testament Reconfiguration: Christ's Reign, the Church, and 1 Timothy 2

The New Testament answers that question not by abolishing the prophetic framework, but by centering on Jesus Christ and the community united to him. Christ, the anointed king foretold in the Psalms and the prophets, now reigns universally. Following his resurrection, he is exalted "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph 1:21), and the Father has placed "all things under his feet and given him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22–23).

Paul makes the ecclesial dimension of this reign explicit: God has formed the church from Jews and Gentiles so that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities" (Eph 3:10). The church is not merely a beneficiary of Christ's reign. It is the public instrument through which his authority is disclosed—including to the powers themselves.

The New Testament also explicitly applies the corporate and political language of Old Testament Israel to the church. Peter declares: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet 2:9). The church is now the holy nation, the new temple (Eph 2:22; 1 Cor 3:16), the anointed community (2 Cor 1:21; 1 John 2:20), the fulfillment of Zion (Heb 12:22)—the visible community in which Christ's kingship is confessed and made public.

This union between Christ and his church carries direct political significance. When Saul persecuted Christ's people, the risen Lord said Saul was attacking him (Acts 9). Revelation extends this to rulers and nations, and declares that this leads to judgment. Political authority in rebellion against Christ persecutes the saints and is condemned for it: "In her was found the blood of prophets and of saints" (Rev 18:24).

This brings us to the text at the center of my argument: 1 Timothy 2:1–4.

Paul instructs that prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

This passage is commonly read today as a counsel of political quietism: pray for the rulers so they leave you alone. But notice what Paul actually says. He does not pray merely for civil peace as such. He prays for civil peace as the condition under which the church may live in *eusebeia* and *semnotēs*—piety and public dignity. Civil peace, in other words, is not treated as an end in itself. It is ordered toward a higher good: a form of common life in which piety may be practiced, embodied, and made visible. And this ordering is connected directly to God's desire that all people come to the knowledge of the truth. Rulers, therefore, are not neutral bystanders. They stand in a real relation to this end. They either secure or frustrate the public conditions under which piety may flourish and the knowledge of the truth may spread.

Read in its classical concert—as Reformed theologians consistently read it—this text does not stand alone. It is flanked by Psalm 2's command to kiss the Son, by Psalm 72's vision of kings falling down before the Messiah, and by Isaiah 49's promise of nursing fathers. Together, they form a coherent prophetic-apostolic political theology: rulers are accountable to Christ, they are called to serve his people, and the nations are blessed when they do.

A natural objection arises at this point, and it is the one Hart and VanDrunen press most insistently: if this is what the prophets foresaw and what Christ's exaltation established, why does the New Testament itself seem so silent on rulers fulfilling these duties? Paul writes to a church under Nero, not Constantine. He never instructs Nero to become a nursing father. Does not the apostolic context itself establish the permanent political norm?

The answer—already given by Augustine—is that the apostolic situation was a *circumstance*, not a *norm*. Augustine freely acknowledges the silence: neither the Gospels nor the apostolic letters record a case where rulers were called upon to defend the church. But he denies that this absence settles a permanent theological principle. The apostolic church existed as a persecuted minority within a pagan political order. What lay beyond their experience was not excluded by Scripture but anticipated by the very prophecies we have been expounding. Psalm 2's summons to kings, Isaiah's nursing fathers, the vision of rulers bringing their glory into the holy city—these were always pointing toward a historical moment the apostles had not yet seen. When rulers began to submit to Christ and protect the church, Augustine understood this not as a theological novelty but as the progressive unfolding of prophetic expectation.

This means the separationist argument from apostolic silence proves too much. It mistakes a historical circumstance for a theological limit. The silence of the apostles tells us about their situation, not about the scope of political obligation under Christ's reign. The Reformed tradition that follows—from Martin Bucer through James Bannerman—largely echoed these Augustinian insights.

IV. The Reformed Retrieval: Magistrates Under Christ's Kingship

The Reformed tradition did not treat these themes as a speculative extension beyond Scripture, but as its straightforward canonical teaching. What unites Bucer, Calvin, and their successors is a shared conviction: that civil authority is ordered not merely to peace, but to the cultivation and protection of a pious public life. They arrive at this conclusion by reading 1 Timothy 2 in concert with Psalm 2 and Isaiah 49—exactly as we have been doing. Let me trace this through six key figures.

A. Martin Bucer

Martin Bucer's mature political treatise *De Regno Christi* (1550) argues that civil magistrates do not govern within an autonomous temporal sphere. They govern within the universal dominion of Christ, whose kingdom claims the allegiance of all nations and rulers. Bucer states this with striking directness: "every true kingdom of the world... subjects itself to the Kingdom of Christ." This is not a hope deferred to the eschaton. It is the ongoing political obligation of rulers in the age of the exalted Messiah.

Bucer grounds this conviction directly in Psalm 2's summons to kings to "serve the LORD with fear" and "kiss the Son," and in Isaiah 49:23's promise that rulers will be "nursing fathers" of God's people. These texts, he insists, do not merely describe Israel's past. They reveal the enduring vocation of political authority under Christ's reign.

What is especially notable in Bucer is that he extends this responsibility beyond mere external protection to include active receptivity to the church's doctrinal witness. Magistrates must not only defend the church but also receive its teaching. Because Christ speaks through his ministers, rulers honor Christ by listening to and receiving their instruction. Political authority does not stand above the church as its judge but beneath Christ as his servant, encountering his authority through the church's proclamation. Bucer understands political authority as ordered not only to the church's protection, but to the shaping of a common life in which piety may be learned, sustained, and publicly expressed.

B. John Calvin

John Calvin systematizes these themes with characteristic theological precision, weaving together the royal Psalms, Isaiah's nursing-father prophecy, and Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2 into a unified account of civil authority under Christ's kingship.

For Calvin, civil government is a divine institution whose scope extends beyond merely procedural justice. Magistrates are appointed not only to preserve civil order but also to ensure that "a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians," protecting true worship from "public sacrilege." The gift of "ruling" is given, Calvin argues, "for the upbuilding of the church"—and this principle extends to civil rulers, not only to ecclesiastical officers. Accordingly, "no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern." This is not an incidental remark. It names the telos of political order. Peace and justice are not ultimate ends; they are ordered toward a rightly directed public life in which God is known, worshiped, and honored.

Calvin's exposition of 1 Timothy 2:2 is particularly striking. He argues that by these words Paul "entrusts the condition of the church to [rulers'] protection and care." Civil peace is not the ultimate end; it serves the higher end of godliness and the church's public mission. He then draws the comparison directly: "magistrates were appointed by God for the protection of religion, as well as of the peace and decency of society, in exactly the same manner that the earth is appointed to produce food." And he ties this immediately to Psalm 2 and Isaiah 49:

> It is not enough, if by giving to every one what is due, they restrain all acts of violence, and maintain peace; but they must likewise endeavour to promote religion, and to regulate morals by wholesome discipline. The exhortation of David to 'kiss the Son,' and the prophecy of Isaiah, that they shall be nursing-fathers of the Church, are not without meaning; and, therefore, they have no right to flatter themselves, if they neglect to lend their assistance to maintain the worship of God.

Here is the classical Reformed reading in exceptionally clear form: 1 Timothy 2 is not about political quietism. It is about the duty of magistrates to order civil peace toward the promotion of religion, such that a pious public life may take root and flourish. Psalm 2 and Isaiah 49 are the prophetic warrants for that duty.

In his commentary on Psalm 2, Calvin emphasizes that the summons—"Be wise, O kings… Kiss the Son"—is directed to rulers explicitly in their political office. For rulers to "be wise," they must "submit themselves to the authority of Christ… Until they have learned to fear him, they are destitute of understanding." This is not merely a call to personal faith. It is a call to political obedience to Christ's universal dominion.

From his commentary on Isaiah 49, Calvin draws the positive content of the nursing-father image: magistrates are the church's "guardians and defenders," entrusted with authority in order to "defend the Church and to promote the glory of God." They "supply all that is necessary for nourishing the offspring of the church"—defending its worship, supporting its ministry, and fostering the conditions necessary for its flourishing. And from the *Institutes*: rulers must prevent "idolatry, sacrilege against the name of God, blasphemies against his truth, and other offenses against religion" from openly appearing and spreading among the people.

Calvin carefully preserves the institutional distinction throughout: magistrates do not administer Word or sacrament, preach, or exercise ecclesiastical discipline. Yet this distinction does not imply religious neutrality. Civil authority exists within Christ's kingdom and fulfills its vocation by protecting the church and fostering the public acknowledgment of his reign.

C. Synopsis of Purer Theology, Jus Divinum, *and Turretin*

These principles were codified in the seventeenth century. The *Synopsis of Purer Theology* (1625), representing the collective judgment of the leading Reformed theologians at Leiden, was among the earliest to do so with confessional precision. Grounding the magistrate's nursing-father vocation directly in Isaiah 49, Isaiah 60, and Psalm 2, the *Synopsis* interprets these texts not as relics of Israel's past but as descriptions of the ongoing political vocation under

Christ's universal reign—and understands the submission of rulers to Christ's church in history as the progressive fulfillment of prophetic expectation.

The *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici* (1646), a major exposition of the political theology of the Westminster Assembly, grounds the magistrate's nursing-father duties in Isaiah 49:23, specifying three concrete responsibilities: removing external impediments to true religion; positively supporting the church's public worship and ministry; and providing the material conditions necessary for the church's life.

Francis Turretin in his masterwork of Reformed scholasticism—the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679–1685)—is equally explicit. He describes magistrates as nursing fathers called to care not only for the temporal well-being of their subjects, but—"what is far more necessary"—for their spiritual good. He directly addresses the separationist objection: Christ did not exclude princes from the care of religion; those who said "Kiss the Son" did not repel kings from that duty. And crucially, Turretin insists these obligations fall on all rulers regardless of personal faith—he names the emperor Tiberius as accountable to Psalm 2 in his public office. The obligation is grounded not in one's private faith but in the office itself.

D. William Symington

William Symington's *Messiah the Prince* (1839) draws the implications of this tradition with particular clarity. His most important contribution is his insistence that Christ's royal authority extends not only to individuals but to associations—civil bodies considered as moral agents. "Societies, like persons, are under the government of God, and subject to the divine law. Bodies-politic or corporations are to be regarded as large moral subjects." In other words, "associations are as much under the mediatorial sovereignty as individuals." This is why Scripture speaks in corporate moral predicates: an "ungodly nation," a "hypocritical nation," a "rebellious nation." And because societies are moral subjects, the question of piety cannot be confined to individuals alone. It necessarily takes on a public dimension, implicating the structures and aims of political life itself.

Symington is especially clear that Psalm 2 addresses rulers as rulers: subjection to Christ is "directly enjoined upon civil rulers," who are required "in their public and official character" to "serve the Lord with fear, and to kiss the Son." The nursing-father language of Isaiah 49:23 is deliberately anti-quietist in his reading: the prophecy belongs to gospel times and "surely supposes" the subjection of civil rulers to Christ her head. He sharply rejects the claim that the best thing the state can do for the church is simply leave her alone: that posture, he observes, is difficult to reconcile with the figure of a nurse, whose office is not discharged by indifference.

Symington also anticipates the move that tries to exempt politics from Christ's reign on the grounds that civil society belongs to the order of nature rather than grace. He concedes the premise—civil society is founded in nature—then denies the inference: "its subjection to Christ is not the least inconsistent with this." Marriage is natural and yet is to be conducted "in the Lord"; likewise, nations may originate in nature and yet remain "placed under Christ." The mediatorial administration of the moral universe includes the public order.

Symington insists throughout on real institutional distinction—his phrase is "diverse without being adverse." Civil rulers do not become ministers of Word and sacrament. But they do become public ministers to the church in a political mode—protecting, supplying, and ordering external conditions so that the church's worship and witness may flourish. "The question is not whether religion can exist without national support," he writes, "but what is the duty of nations toward the religion and church of Christ." And lest anyone think this tradition belongs only to an earlier period before the doctrine of the church's spiritual independence had been fully articulated, it is worth noting that James Bannerman—whose *The Church of Christ* (1868) remains one of the premier Reformed treatments of ecclesiology, and whose commitment to the church's spiritual independence is beyond question—could nonetheless insist that "without some religion, no society on earth could exist at all; and without the true religion, no society can exist happily," and that political neutrality toward the church is neither possible nor stable, because the state must always relate to the church either as friend and protector or as adversary. There is no third option.

V. Conclusion: The Summons Stands

Let me conclude.

The prophets address nations as nations—as corporate moral subjects accountable to the Lord of all the earth. They are judged for injustice, for idolatry, for their treatment of God's people, and for refusing to acknowledge his anointed king.

The New Testament does not revoke this framework. Christ now reigns universally following his resurrection and exaltation, and his reign is made visible through the church—the holy nation and living temple in which his authority is confessed.

Paul's command in 1 Timothy 2 therefore carries more political significance than modern readings often allow. The prayer for rulers is not merely a prayer for political quiet. It is a prayer that rulers will fulfill their vocation: securing the peace under which the church may live in godliness and dignity and the knowledge of the truth may spread. Civil peace is not the end of politics. Piety is. And rulers are judged accordingly.

This is how the classical Reformed tradition consistently read these texts—from Bucer and Calvin through Turretin and Symington. Magistrates do not rule in a sphere insulated from Christ's kingship. They govern under it. And governing under it means more than tolerating the church. It means actively promoting the conditions of pious public life: protecting true worship, removing impediments to the church's mission, and governing in conscious submission to the risen Lord. "No government," Calvin concluded, "can be happily established unless piety is the first concern."

The modern separationist account rightly insists on the institutional distinction between church and state. But it errs when it imagines civil authority existing within a religiously neutral order detached from the reign of the risen Christ. Nations are not neutral managers of social order. They are corporate moral subjects under Christ's lordship.

And when rulers govern in recognition of that reality—protecting the church, preserving the conditions of its mission, and acknowledging the authority of the risen king—they are doing what the tradition once described as fulfilling both prayer and prophecy. In this way the church's prayer for rulers and the prophets' summons to the nations converge: both look toward the subjection of the powers to the reign of Christ.

They are taking their place in the story that runs from Psalm 2's summons through Isaiah's nursing fathers to the kings of the earth bringing their glory into the New Jerusalem.

Psalm 2 has not been revoked.

It centers on Christ.

Kings are still called to kiss the Son.

And the nations are blessed when they do.