

Recovering Revolution

series – *God & Governance*

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Randy Lovelace

Well, we come to the end of this series on *God & Governance*. I hope and pray that this has been a helpful series. As I've reflected on it over this last week there are things that I wish, perhaps, I covered more, but oh, well, we can't do everything, right? But it has been, I think, a helpful series for me to search my own heart and my own interaction with governance and politics in our day, particularly during an election year. And we turn this morning to this passage in the book of Colossians. And it is my desire today that in many ways I hope that this serves as a suitable conclusion to the series. And the way I would want to conclude it is "Recovering Revolution."

What do I mean by recovering revolution? Well, first of all I'm grateful for some of the reading I've had to do in preparation for the series, and one of those is recovering the original meaning of the word revolution—not what we mean or often understand as the word revolution. I'm grateful to the—though no longer living—the scholar Hannah Arendt, who was a long time professor at the University of Chicago, as she was writing in a book of essays on revolution she seeks to restore the original definition. I'm going to use that as the introduction this morning. Let me read briefly.

"The word 'revolution' was originally an astronomical term which gained increasing importance in the natural sciences through Copernicus and his book on *The Revolution of Heavenly Spheres*. In this scientific usage it retained its precise Latin meaning, designating the regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars, which, since it was known to be beyond the influence of man and hence irresistible, was certainly characterized neither by newness nor by violence. On the contrary, the word clearly indicates a recurring, cyclical movement; [it is the perfect Latin translation of Polybius's *anakiklosis*], a term which also originated in astronomy and was used metaphorically in the realm of politics. If used for the affairs of men on earth, it could signify that there are only a few known forms of government that revolve among mortal men in eternal recurrence with the same irresistible force which makes the stars follow their pre-ordained paths in the skies." She concludes her introduction with this note. "Absolutely nothing could be farther removed from the original word 'revolution' and its meaning than the idea by which all revolutionary actors have possessed and been obsessed, namely, that they are agents in a process which spells the definite end of the old order of things and brings about birth of a new world."

Meaning simply this: Revolution never meant turning over old things and bringing about new things. In fact, it didn't take on that definition until largely the American Revolution. And so what do I mean, then, by recovering revolution? What I mean is this: Recovering a right understanding, for those who profess Christ, of that which is truly revolutionary, irresistible, and untouchable by human hands and human actions—and that is the kingship, the lordship, and the rule and the reign of Christ Jesus. And by having that as a proper understanding and a proper ground, then we would become proper revolutionaries of returning things not to an old order of man, but returning things to their proper place and their proper path, a humble reliance on Christ as king, and in so doing, being able to have an interaction with and an

engagement with the world in which we are placed, understanding the proper order of things under the preordained, sovereign, providential hand of Christ the King, that enables us to be free—to be free of the kingdoms of man that would have us believe that they are the ascendant power. Indeed, for the Christian—as we began this series, I will end it—that the Christian is never first and foremost a citizen of earth; the Christian is first and foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a citizen of heaven, a subject of the king. That, then, transforms how we engage in the world among the kingdoms of men.

Let's look at this together again. Colossians chapter 1. I'll be reading verses 9-20, but my emphasis will be on verses 15-20. Paul writes:

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Our Heavenly Father, we now turn our eyes and our hearts to your word. We would pray specifically for the work of your Holy Spirit, that it is not our hearts or our minds that make your words alive, rather it is the fact that these words come from your servant Paul, that come from your servant and your son, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and by your Spirit these words have life. May they leap from the page. May they transform our hearts to give us a vision for recovering the true revolution of having Jesus as King. And may you enable us, then, with Jesus as our king, to understand what it means to live lives here while we await the return of the King. Help us, we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This morning you'll see in your outline as we look at this passage, to be able to recover the true revolution, to have Jesus as King that rightly sets our work here in perspective, we have to understand the **Rivals**; secondly, what does the **Recovery** look like; and then thirdly, our response: **Rejoicing, Rivals, Recovery, Rejoicing**.

We began this series by looking at the reality that we are people of this world, that live in it, and by God's design the Christian—though recognize not everyone here is a Christian—but Christianity states that because if you are a Christian then you have been called to live in this world as a follower of Christ. As a follower of Christ you are called to be in the world, engaged in the marketplace, engaged in governance, engaged in policy making, engaged in decision making, in the making of families, creating of places and homes, and to serve others. And because we are in the world and called to live in the world as followers of Christ, we've also understood from Paul in Romans that the governing powers and authorities are here because of God's ordained purpose. There are authority structures which we are called to submit to, not just externally, but we are called in humility to pray for those who are in authority over us. But we've also recognized the reality that as people who are in the world, and as we understand the human heart, the human heart cannot help but love stuff. We are lovers first, and our loves affect our thinking. As such, because we are lovers, we are what the Bible would call 'worshippers.' We worship things. We worship people. We are by nature worshippers and lovers. And without God as King—because we are sinners—we are constantly tempted to worship people and things. We are idolaters. We set things up as rivals to God. And in so doing we dethrone God. And when we dethrone God, either in our thoughts or in our hearts, we then have rivals for his place. And those rivals can be programs, they can be people.

We've discussed over these last couple of months the reality that one of the things we do within our given context in our given country is that there are all stripes on the political spectrum. There are lots of stops on the spectrum, as we are told. That spectrum, obviously, I guess, includes the left and the right—although if we hear Hannah Arendt, we recognize that it's probably more like a circle. There are only so many governing structures in the world, but nonetheless... We are tempted within our day, and regardless of country we are tempted at times to elevate as rival particular programs. By that I mean stops along the political spectrum. And programs and policies, in many ways, provide their own vision for human flourishing and joy. And within our own day and within this year—even within the last few weeks—you will have heard or received either robo-calls or e-mails or you've seen ads galore of how these different stops along the political spectrum are offering to us a means of salvation. No, they don't use that word. But they do use phrases like, 'To make your lives better,' 'To improve your lives,' 'To serve you,' 'To help us to be a better people.'

But what happens is this: That when the Christian—if you are a Christian or not—when we do not understand who Christ is, in all that he is—which is proclaimed here by Paul so eloquently—and we easily slip into the arguments of the kingdoms of the earth, we fall prey to idolizing particular kinds of programs, political programs, regardless of your stop on the political spectrum. And when Christ is not in his place as preeminent, as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, then what begins to have ascendancy in our hearts and our minds are these particular programs, and it also can be people.

Consider for just a moment. Regardless of what you think--and I do not want anyone to walk out of here saying, *Well, he said this about Hillary Clinton or He said this about Donald Trump.* I'm simply going to use what I understand to be their phrases as best that I can. There are particular programs, but they're also people. And these people are saying: One, 'We can make America great again,' or 'I'm with you' or 'I'm with her' or 'I will help the middle class.' 'I will

provide jobs.' 'I will bring about better trade.' 'I will establish greater justice in the judicial system.' 'I will establish this kind of priorities for the country and a vision for flourishing for the United States.' Each one uses their own language of salvation and hope. And when we forget that Christ is preeminent, what begins to happen is the ascendance of someone or something along the political spectrum, even if you are a moderate, even if you have grown cynical about the political process. Even cynicism can become its own form of rival to Christ, because you can begin to say, *What difference does politics make?* or *What difference does Christ on the cross and resurrection—What difference has it made?* Cynicism and idolatry of various forms of either programs or people can gain hold.

And when that happens the body of Christ can be splintered along political lines. Indeed, I've had conversations with Christians of different races, different class, different geography, different theologies, and even some within the same theology, who will say the true Christian position, the only the only Biblical choice for Christians is 'Candidate X.' And I've heard people who agree on theology disagree on who that person is. And what that tells me is that when anyone tries to seize for me the truly biblical position and say, *Jesus would essentially give his stamp of approval toward this person*, then what begins to happen is we set up rivals, and it splinters the body of Christ. Because when Christ is not truly ascendant, free from these political anchors, then we begin to fight amongst ourselves, and we try to claim ground that even Jesus would not allow himself to be boxed in by. When Jesus was asked, *Do we pay taxes or not?* they were trying to essentially say, *Well, who do you support?* Jesus did not fall for it, nor should we. We have the Christian freedom, by the wisdom of God, to make the best decision that you can make. But we must be careful and must avoid claiming that the only Biblical candidate must be this one. Because when we do, we are trying in some way to fall in with the programs of men, and we dethrone God very subtly.

So what does it mean, then, to recover revolution. Paul tells us here so easily in verses 15-18. First he tells us look at the person of Christ. He says, "He," that is, Christ, "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him." Recovering the revolution of following Christ, with whom there is no rival at all, is understanding first who Christ is in his person, and Paul tells us here that he is the God who is invisible made visible. And he is indeed the firstborn over all creation. He is the one who is full of glory and beauty and power. He says, "And he is before all things and in him all things hold together." He is the one who is sovereign, whose providence, guided by grace and mercy, upholds all things. Whether you are a believer or not, whether you recognize him as your Savior or not, I can say to you through God's Word that Christ's grace has been poured out on you because your life is sustained and you're breathing this morning. He has provided for you even when you fail to acknowledge that it is his provision.

But let me say this: Jesus—Paul is telling us—is worthy of glory and worthy of worship, and well before we understand what he has done. To recover Christ as King begins by seeing him first for who he is before we even see him for what he has done. He is God made visible. A wonderful Presbyterian Scottish pastor wrote these words (Samuel Rutherford) a few hundred years ago. "Put the beauty of ten thousand thousand worlds of paradises, like the Garden of Eden, in one; put all trees, all flowers, all smells, all colors, all taste, all joys, all sweetness, all loveliness in

one. O what a fair and excellent thing would that be? And yet it would be less to that fair, and dearest and well beloved Christ, than one drop of rain to the whole seas, rivers, lakes, and fountains of ten thousand earths." Before we understand what he has done, we must note that there is nothing in all creation—were we to put all of your best memories and your best experiences all in one place they would pale in comparison to his person. Because he tells us he is the image of the invisible God. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All thrones, all dominions, all rulers and authorities, all things are underneath him. They pale in comparison.

But it's not just seeing his person. It's seeing his program, to recover Jesus's program. What do I mean? Verse 13 tells us. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." What that couple of verses declares: Not one ounce of creation could do it. Not all the kingdoms and all their armies and all their glory, pomp, and circumstance. Not one king can truly forgive sins, except Christ. Not one king, not one ruler, not one president, not one program, not one political spectrum. No one has ever said to you in your most unlovely and ugliest of moments, "I love you. I have died for you. I will give up all that I have that you may have life." Not one has said to us, "I will go without all comforts. I will give up all glory and go to a place where I will not even have a pillow for my head that you might have life. I will become the most impoverished of beings, so that you might have true riches. I will be last, so that I can serve you, that you might be first, my beloved, the redeemed." And he does it all because of his grace and his mercy.

No one can reconcile two people like Christ can. Because two people, regardless of their relation, who are broken in their relationship because of sin, because of offense—neither one of those people are beyond the arm of God's grace. Both have received the gift of grace as they receive it from Christ. Therefore only as two human beings who are sinners who have hurt one another, who understand that I have sinned and I have been forgiven, can only move out into others and offer forgiveness and be reconciled. Peace treaties, money, wealth, houses, cars, whatever—none of that can ever truly bring reconciliation. Only the work of Christ, who says, "In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Because only in Christ do I see and do you see who you really are—a sinner in lock step with the dominion of darkness because of sin. But in Christ you can be freed from the dominion of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son. This is what Christ has done.

But more than that, he was raised, he tells us. He was, verse 18: "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." So not only does Jesus bring forgiveness and reconciliation by paying the debt of our sin and reconciling us to the Father, receiving the wrath of God for our sin, he was raised from the dead. And not one king, not one president, not one political party can raise anyone from the dead. Christ came out of the grave. And he says, "He is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." That means this, as one writer states. Dr. Mark Jones the on the resurrection states these words: "The resurrection of Jesus did not function as an isolated occurrence, as though a man were simply to rise from the dead. His resurrection ushered in a new creation, of which Jesus is described as the firstborn or the firstfruits from the dead. As the firstborn from the dead, Christ's dignity is in

view. Jesus acted as the true pioneer, the true inaugurator, who opened up the way for the resurrection of all people. Without his rising from the dead, no one will rise. All resurrections to life depend on his resurrection.” What he is telling us is what Dr. Timothy Keller said years ago in a much more pithy way. “Karl Marx,” he says, “was right, to a degree, that religion is the opiate of the masses. But what he didn’t understand is something that the Christian can understand. That while religion may be the opiate of the masses, the gospel is the smelling salts for the human being.”

The Gospel, which includes Good Friday—Christ dead in our place for our sin—on Sunday morning was raised to life, that the gospel is about resurrection and restoration. That means the lives we live now are the beginning of eternity. They're not waiting for eternity. We've already begun. But that the end is not death, but life. Resurrection: All will be raised in Christ. The question is do you know this one who has been raised from death to life? And whether you do or not will decide where it is that you spend eternity—either with him or a knowledge of him but not near him, but know only his wrath. Christ is the firstborn. He is the Glorious One, the Beautiful One, the Redeeming One, and the Resurrected One.

So you may be sitting there and saying, *Well, OK, we've heard this before. In fact, perhaps it was last Sunday.* But the reality is we need to hear the Gospel every day, because we forget it every day, Martin Luther was purported to have said. And it is this reason we spend most of our waking hours outside of this room—we spend most of our waking hours engaged in the marketplace or in the world and in relationships and in all this political stuff of this year, so easily our sights, our hearts, our fears, our anxieties are raised, and those we can lose sight of the preeminence of Christ, of his person, of His salvation, of His resurrection. Which is why we seek to recover Christ, who is the one who is worthy of our worship, that then enables us to truly be a people who are tinged not by fear or cynicism or anger, but a people who are described as a rejoicing people. My third point. It's for this reason, as Paul tells us, we've been brought from a domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of light. That means that the Gospel is the only one that can truly provide freedom, real freedom. Freedom from believing that any person or any political program is our salvation. It means this: It means that we have, as a people of rejoicing, we rejoice in him, who—verse 19, it says: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the Cross.” That means we are shaped by rejoicing in the work of Christ and His resurrection. That means we're a people of hope and not of fear. Kingdoms of this world, therefore—we understand, because Christ is who he is—kingdoms of this world are not ultimate. No program, no person has his beauty, his power, his grace, his mercy—only Christ.

And if I am freed from the tyranny of human politics and of its constant stirring of our minds, then that enables me to have a hope that supersedes these things. It transcends whatever is going on circumstantially in our world. It enables us to actually be fully engaged in what's going on in the world around us. We're called to be, as we've said in the series, to be politically engaged, to study the issues, to be actively engaged in voting, to care about what's going on in our world, but recognizing that we have a hope that is not dependent on what happens in November—that our hope is pinned to one who is eternal, who reigns, who holds all things in his hands. That is our hope. And with that as our hope we can avoid cynicism, because we

understand that the gospel brings change. And if the gospel has brought change in me, and I'm called to be and you are called to be an ambassador of Christ, then we can bring the gospel that brings about change in other people's lives by the way we lead our lives, and as such we can then understand we can be free from cynicism. We can be involved in politics and policies because we recognize that we've been changed, and we can bring about the character of Christ in our work and in our politics.

But we can also be a people of love. That means, because we have been loved by Christ and redeemed by him, that makes us a people who are able to love others, not because of how they vote, but because they've been made in the image of God and are worthy to receive the grace of Christ, because we have received the grace of Christ. And we love one another, and we seek to serve one another. We seek to move into relationship with one another, sharpen one another. The love of Christ—it comes about in the human heart that is rejoicing because Christ is preeminent. It enables us, then, to be a people who aren't looking at the things that the world looks at. *You voted for who? The real problem with this world are the conservatives. The real problem with this world are the liberals. The real weaklings are the moderates.* We can avoid such language because that's not what defines us. And we can work and worship and serve together regardless, because our hope, our rejoicing, our love is shaped by something that transcends all of it. Christ, who holds all things together.

It's not a copout to say that Christ frees us. I do not mean to say that politics, then, do not matter. They do matter. Law matters. Those who serve in authority matter, because they matter to God. And we need to be a people engaged, but not captured by the things of this world, because we have been transformed through the gospel. May the Lord make us a people of prayer, praying for human flourishing in Christ. That the character of Christ, the love of Christ would break out of his church and transform the communities around us. Make us a people of prayer, praying for those in authority over us, regardless of party. And make us a people of love, because we have been loved through him. May the Lord give us wisdom and discernment in our conversations. May the Lord give us wisdom and discernment in the voting booth. May the Lord give us peace as we hear different reports or threats or promises on our screens. But may the Lord give us a hope that is anchored in Christ, in whom there is no shadow of turning, who is above all things, who is the image of the invisible God, who is the Preeminent One. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would enable us to be a people transformed by the gospel, a people who are free to love you, free from sin and its guilt, free from hating those we don't understand, free from pettiness, and free from idolatry of people or programs. Make us a people, by your Spirit, through the Preeminent One, the Lord Jesus, a people that worship you first. Lord, may you bring about this revolution in Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.