

## Surrendering the public space: Critique of a liberal pluralist vision

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*Editor's note: This article was originally published for a UK-based audience, but the implications are universally applicable and highly constructive for Christians everywhere.*

*ABSTRACT: John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), has written about the resignation of Tim Farron as leader of the Liberal Democrats, arguing that Christians should "advocate for a truly plural society" and be "willing to permit sexual freedom to others." Joe Boot critiques this pluralistic vision, arguing that Stevens hasn't differentiated between a crime and a sin. We should apply the Bible to all areas, not capitulate to pluralism.*

Most Christians in the UK are by now aware that the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, the professing evangelical Christian Tim Farron, resigned his position after the recent general election, citing the radical intolerance of elite political and media culture as the primary reason for his departure. Mr. Farron claimed he could not see his way clear to remaining in his role because he believed leading the party in the current cultural climate had become incompatible with being a faithful Christian. Without getting into the whys and wherefores of liberal democratic policy and how consistent it may or may not be for a Bible-believing Christian to represent such a party, all Christians of good faith will no doubt feel genuine sympathy for Mr. Farron in light of the veritable heresy trail he endured in Parliament and the media regarding his personal view on homosexuality – simply because it was known he professed an evangelical faith with an orthodox view of marriage and sexual practice.

Whilst it is true that Mr. Farron partially brought this situation upon himself – first by equivocation and then by foolishly caving in under pressure – Christians should be less employed in condemning him for weakness and more concerned with asking why he was so badly prepared by the church to answer such deceptive and hypocritical questioning in the public forum. Farron's incompetence in this area is a damning commentary on the church's ability or willingness to equip its members to cogently defend the truth of the gospel. Moreover, we should equally be asking why, in the wake of his resignation, Christian leaders who should have helped him and those like him with the apologetic task (a task given to all Christians in such situations), are using the opportunity to support the ubiquitous emergence of a pluralist secular social order in place of the Christian one – indeed attacking the remnants of Christendom and the magisterial reformation amongst Christians! It is simply astonishing to read evangelical Christian leaders using this moment to express their support for the civil rights of the LGBTQ community to practice and celebrate whatever sexual immorality they choose, whilst simultaneously rebuking Christian organisations working for the honor of God and the righteousness of his law in the nation as being illiberal. With friends like these for Christians in the public space, who is in need of enemies? These things are all evidence of the radical *politicization* of a modern church, unwilling for the light of God's Word to shine on its humanistic views of cultural, social and political life.

In these circumstances it is deeply discouraging to find that one such well-intentioned leader is John Stevens of the FIEC. His **recent piece on Farron's resignation**, which is the subject of this article, is clearly from the mind of a capable lawyer educated in and committed to a contemporary version of liberalism, not from a theologian or philosopher directed by a consistently scriptural vision of the scope of the gospel or the nature of culture.<sup>1</sup> As such, his good intentions should not make him immune to public criticism, especially since he represents many free evangelicals across the UK. In this writer's view, Mr. Stevens in his article demonstrates no adequate comprehension of the biblical idea of social order (in fact no scriptural defence or even a reference is offered in support of his perspective), nor of the

intrinsic impossibility of achieving stability for any society rooted in *polytheism* – the correct term for the kind of radical religious, moral and even legal pluralism (given the place of Islam in Britain) apparently advocated by Stevens, which Scripture calls idolatry. In short, Stevens' piece is presumptuously dismissive of the legacy of Christendom and the reformation (and so of Christian social order), remarkably naïve in its foggy vision of pluralism, and damaging to the cause of Christ and the gospel.

### **Two Kingdoms?**

That being said, this writer can both appreciate John Stevens' deep evangelical faith, well-meant objectives in commenting on the demise of Mr. Farron, and agree with his article on a number of important points: the hounding of Tim Farron was indeed a national disgrace; the hypocrisy and intolerance of the progressive secular elites was palpable and should be exposed; the failure of church discipline and the church's witness in the matter of human sexuality is of profound concern and we need to get our own house in order; that Christians must stand firm on the matter of biblical sexual ethics in their own lives and churches; and the need to pray for God's mercy and revival in the nation. All Christians of good faith should applaud this stance. With these concerns every scripturally-rooted believer ought to be able to heartily agree.

However, serious problems emerge when Stevens asks Christians to "*adopt a political philosophy that is appropriate for a genuinely plural society that encompasses both believers and unbelievers.*" What does it mean for a social order to encompass the believer and non-believer in a genuinely plural society? What is the philosophy he has in mind? Stevens does not actually say what that political philosophy is, indicate its provenance, or explain where it is justified or implied in the Word of God. Nor is he able to tell us what the limits of this plural society are. High-sounding phrases about rights, pluralism and tolerance do not constitute an argument sufficient to support his directive that Christians, "*urgently need to get over the residual legacy of Christendom and the magisterial Reformation. In this regard recovering our non-conformist history is of vital importance.*" According to John Stevens, this writer, who is himself a non-conformist, should abandon the vision of a Christian social order and throw over the legacy of Christendom and the Reformation in that regard – legacies that in fact founded the freedoms the West has historically enjoyed! We should ask Mr. Stevens on what basis we are directed to do this.

In this writer's judgment, what is typically disguised within John Stevens' articles and speeches on this subject is both a set of unjustified philosophical assumptions which appear grounded in the scholastic tradition of natural law theory and, I strongly suspect, a novel Two Kingdoms Theology emanating from Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido (though I would be delighted to be proved wrong on that score). The purpose of this essay is not to cover such issues in detail; however, underlying philosophical assumptions and theological resources should at least be acknowledged when the director of a national fellowship of evangelical churches issues his non-conformist encyclicals to guide the faithful.

The Two Kingdoms Theology, as articulated by leading proponents like David VanDrunen, slices up reality into two domains or kingdoms, both under God's broad supervision – the spiritual or redemptive kingdom and the common or civil kingdom. These two domains are said to have different ends, functions, laws and modes of operation. In the *common kingdom* we have the family, the school, science, art, civil society (or all cultural life) and the state – these areas of life cannot and should not be *distinctly Christian* as they are part of an allegedly common or *neutral realm* guided by natural law, common to believers and unbelievers alike. The church, on the other hand, is ruled directly by Christ

where the standards of Scripture apply, but contra the example of King David in Psalm 2, Daniel in Babylon, Amos to the nations around Israel, Jonah in Nineveh, John the Baptist before Herod and the apostle Paul before Roman governors, we must not seek to inculcate those standards and bring them to bear for political life and the social order; those standards are for Christians alone. God's revealed Word is for believers, but not the worldly civil kingdom.

The logic of this Two Kingdoms idea is expressed when Stevens claims, "*Our goal is not political power but the gathering of God's people in readiness for the coming of the eschatological kingdom, for which we await the return of the Lord Jesus from heaven. Our primary task is evangelism, and in the meantime it will often prove impossible to serve both God and Caesar, despite our best efforts to fulfil our duties in both spheres of life.*" This not only seems to shunt the kingdom of Christ out of the present historical situation and into eternity, but suggests there is an underlying dichotomy of purpose between serving God's redemptive intentions and valid use of political power. The political task is somehow made incongruent with the reality of the eschatological reign of Christ. This notion, as well as focusing on doing evangelism while we await *parousia*, with little or no expectation that cultural and political life can or will be turned toward faithfulness to God, is classic Two Kingdoms rhetoric.

Yet where in Scripture are we ever called to 'serve both God *and* Caesar'? We are only ever called to serve Christ the Lord in every area of life, including the political life of the state. We cannot have two masters. In engaging political life, we must never *serve Caesar* (i.e. the state) as though there is a common kingdom *independent* of the immediate reign of the *Son of Man*, now seated at the right hand of God in the place of total authority, everything being made subject to him (Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-2:10). But we can serve Christ, by serving his purposes in the state, as in any other area of life. It is *because* we can and must serve Christ the Lord in every area of life that we have the authority to prophetically call political power to do justice and bend the knee to God in all its functions.

The problem for man is not the creational *structures* he is called to serve in (like the family and state) but the *direction* of that service – the direction of our hearts. Will we, in our life and work, be turned toward idolatry or true worship, because from the heart spring the issues of life (Prov. 4:23)? Thus when Stevens basically juxtaposes political, cultural and social transformation with seeking the eschatological coming kingdom of Christ; when *personal evangelism* rather than the broader mission of *evangelization* (Matt. 28:16-20 includes teaching and disciplining *nations*, not just individuals) is said to be the priority; when prayer for revival has no apparent connection with the transformation of the political life of the nation, it is these Two Kingdoms theological and philosophical ideas that seem to underlie his reasoning.

There is no space here to go into a detailed refutation of Two Kingdoms thought but I would suggest the interested reader begin by reading this author's book *Gospel Culture: Living in God's Kingdom* (Ezra Press, 2016) to get a handle on the essential differences in view. In the scriptural perspective on the Kingdom of God, there is no radical discontinuity between creation and redemption, and no artificial dualism between a 'spiritual' and an 'earthly' rule of Christ – between an 'upper storey' and 'lower storey' of life. Christ's rule and reign extends over every area of life and thought, over the visible and invisible, and over every human institution. All spheres of life are to recognise the authority of Christ and seek to submit themselves to his Word-revelation. There is only *one creation* and it is this good, though fallen creation, that is being redeemed and reconciled to God, destined to be delivered from its bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:19-25). The cosmic battle for this creation order is between the kingdom of light and kingdom of darkness (those two kingdoms we do recognise), but Scripture acknowledges no dualism – no common and redemptive kingdoms, with the church somehow positioned as the only site

where God's redemptive life and kingdom power is manifest. The true kingdom of Christ can be more truly manifest in a faithful Christian family or political party than in an apostate church.

### **Pluralism, plurality and Christianity**

In view of his peculiar theological and philosophical assumptions, John Stevens regularly calls upon Christians to heartily pursue a *truly plural* society. The question remains, what does this mean, what does it entail? The pagan Greco-Roman world was in many respects a pluralistic society with an innumerable array of cults licensed for freedom of worship. It indulged expansive and shocking liberties for debauched sexual vice (though marriage between a man and woman was still privileged in Roman law) and considerable freedom of thought and expression – just think of Paul's freedom of speech at Mars Hill and the protection he enjoyed as a Roman citizen (Acts 16:35-40; Acts 17:22-34; Acts 22:22-29)! But was ancient Rome a *better and more God-glorifying culture* than nineteenth-century England after the evangelical awakening in the time of William Wilberforce and the emerging Victorian age, with its Christianized social order and culture of manners, self-restraint and propriety? Though nineteenth-century England was far from *consistently Christian* or ideal, to ask that question is to answer it. Yet nineteenth-century England was *not* a plural society like that of polytheistic Rome.

Christianity does in one sense advocate a kind of pluralism; a *structural* pluralism. First, it recognises that there is a plurality of creational spheres of life enjoying a distinct area of authority ordained by God for the social order – the family, the church and state being three prominent examples found clearly in the Bible. God created everything after its own nature in Genesis so in this plurality of life-spheres each has its own particular nature and guiding structural principle. In other words, at the level of human society, the spheres of family, church and state each have their own internal directing principle so, for example, any man who ordered his home like a church or state would be violating God's *norm* for the family and vice versa. Moreover, Scripture makes plain that each of these spheres is not independent of God in its functioning but is directly *accountable to God and his Word* (See Rom. 13:1-7; Eph. 1:20-23; Eph. 5:22-6:9). Because each distinct area is created by, ordered by and accountable to God, Scripture does not allow one sphere of life and authority to *swallow* the others in a lower-to-higher or parts-to-whole relationship, as found in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. This scriptural principle of distinction has been called *sphere sovereignty*. It means that the family and church are not departments of state, nor can the church institute rule political life. When any social sphere of life overreaches its God-ordained boundary it inevitably becomes tyrannical.

The greatest danger of our age, which Stevens' statist and pluralist vision does not appear to adequately take into account, is the *overreach* of the modern pluralist state. The modern state increasingly seeks to take the place of God by interfering with the preaching of the gospel; the teaching of the church; the nature and structure of marriage, family and human sexuality; as well as meddling in almost every other sphere of life as it strives to police and control everything from thought, speech and education to medicine and the economy – all in terms of its religious humanism. Thus Stevens does not see that by sanctioning and thereby emboldening the state to pass anti-Christian laws about marriage and human sexuality in the name of civil rights and pluralism, he is not only encouraging the violation of God's creational norm for human society, but abetting the state's transgression of *its sphere of authority* and competence, thereby producing tyranny – the totalitarian drift of modern political life. Tim Farron experienced the fruit of this transgression. The state has no God-ordained right to re-order God's order. It has a *delegated* authority to recognise and protect God's order for the political sphere – that is its function (Rom. 13:4). Because Stevens does not define the nature and character of the political sphere of the state in a scripturally-directed way, he is not able to call it to order in the name of Christ, our

prophet, priest and king. And if we fail to recognise Christ's status over all power and authority, we will certainly fail to take hold of our office as prophets, priests and kings, in him (1 Pt. 2:9-10).

Secondly, genuine *structural pluralism* (which actually presupposes the existence of a Christian social order) would not regulate the details of people's lives as the modern "*pluralist*" state does. A Christian structural pluralism allows for a truly competitive public space because God's Word does not authorise the Christian family, church or even a Christian state (as spheres of delegated sovereignty) to go beyond their jurisdiction and dictate with force of sanction what should happen in a given family's daily life or education; what they should believe by creed; how they should spend or invest their money; what they should think or say; where and how they get medical treatment; or whom and with whom they should worship. This is because in a Christian law-order, creational distinctions must be maintained and true worship can never be a matter of coercion. As such a biblical vision for the public space allows for dissent, multiple political parties and elections. It should provide maximal freedom from regulation, supervision and state interference in the other spheres of life. It is no coincidence that Parliamentary democracy arose in a broadly Christian political order. Christianized states in the West have, to a large degree (certainly more than any other kind of state), allowed the free exchange of ideas, freedom of worship, and a vast plethora of freedoms within and under a broadly Christian constitution and law. This kind of social order holds so long as there is a Christian consensus. Crisis emerges when the religious consensus of the people is lost, which is why the West is facing a great social crisis today.

### **Idolatry, sins and crimes**

This *structural pluralism* however, does not imply that a *directional pluralism* is plausible as the *foundation* for a cohesive society. Indeed a structural pluralism which maintains creational distinctions between spheres of life already *presupposes* a clear *directional principle* toward honoring the Lordship of Christ and sovereignty of God over creation. Any kingdom divided against itself cannot stand; if multiple *directions* are introduced at the foundations of a society, its days are numbered. It is for this reason that God not only gave laws to preserve Israel's distinctiveness, he also called the prophets to warn Israel against syncretism, and judged them for their harlotry – unless he had done so, Israel would either have been absorbed by the pagan nations or might have vanished from history like the Hittites.

Returning to the Victorian social order of England, we observe that it was in large measure *structurally pluralistic*. The state was smaller and far less intrusive than the modern state. The flavour of evangelicalism in the era can be seen in the writing and preaching of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He often boasted in the freedoms of England over against those of France and opposed the early efforts at the control of education by the state. The family and church enjoyed true independence. There were broad political freedoms, multiple parties (even powerful independents in the House), and expansive freedoms of speech and worship. However, it was not a *directionally plural* society. England did not honour multiple gods and thereby nurture multiple law-orders, as modern Britain is doing with Islamic *sharia*. The constitutional arrangements of England were not *directionally pluralistic*. There was no confusion over the fact that England was a Christian land, with a Christian social order (not that everyone was a regenerate Christian believer).

It is certainly true that to allow religious freedoms is to risk idolatry, as Stevens points out, but that does not imply a *political obligation* to give people license to live as they please. Since every fallen person outside of Christ is idolatrous and even Christians are often caught up in idolatry in various aspects of life through weakness or blindness, idolatry is a fact of everyday life. However, this does not

mean *polytheism* can be made a basis for a cohesive social order. This is where Stevens goes badly wrong again when he claims, "*If Christians are prepared to permit religious freedom for others, then there ought to be no "in principle" obstacle to being willing to permit sexual freedom to others. The same goes for allowing freedom of speech, even if this permits blasphemy, or Sunday trading and sport, even if this contravene the Sabbath laws.*" The logic of this argument is that if we recognise man is by nature a violator of God's law, and in political life already permit the violation of one important law of God (in this case idolatry via false religion), we can have no *in principle* objection to giving man social freedom to violate other laws of God! In particular, Stevens' argument is that if we allow a measure of freedom of religion in society by not coercing people to attend a particular church or follow a particular faith – though inconsistently he would doubtless not advocate freedom for satanic religion involving child sacrifice or the Hindu practice of *sati* where a woman commits suicide (usually by coercion and by burning on the funeral pyre of her husband) – then we can have no in principle objection to permitting various sexual violations of God's law in society.

This is a bizarre and irrational leap. Stevens' argument here is not only arbitrary – because he would not really advocate freedom for *all* religions, or *all* sexual practices, just the ones he thinks not too objectionable – it is also complete nonsense because Stevens does not take time to *distinguish between a sin and a crime*. The jurisdiction of the sphere of the state does not involve regulating the *totality of human sin*. It does not and should not punish unbelief, failure to tithe, pride, envy, greed, selfishness, lust or covetousness as *crimes*, for example. However the *family* does discipline its children in certain areas of personal sin where the state has no authority to use its coercive power; though the state will have an interest in protecting the family's right to discipline its children if it wants to preserve a stable society. Likewise being rude to parents is not a *criminal* act, but it does require the discipline of the family.

In a similar way, the church will exercise discipline in areas the state has no jurisdiction or interest by suspending, for example, the habitually contentious and unrepentant person from the Lord's Table. But the *sin* of being quarrelsome in the church is not a *crime* under the jurisdiction of the state. This elementary distinction between sin and crime, which is grounded in Scripture, is critically important. Even in the older covenant, strangers and aliens living in Israel were not obligated to be circumcised or to participate in the feasts and festivals of the Hebrews; they were not compelled to sacrifice and worship at the temple. Even though failing to worship the living God is in fact *sinful*, it was not a *criminal* act for the stranger in Israel's constitution. The alien was to be treated with respect and afforded the protections of God's law. At the same time, they were not permitted to violate God's standing law. There was *one law* for the stranger and alien and the Israelite (Ex. 12:49; Lev. 24:22). If you wanted to live in Israel, you couldn't violate the civil elements contained in the law and case law. So it was possible, even in Israel, not to be coerced to participate in the worship the living God and yet to be under the righteous civil law of the land.

Because Stevens does not explicitly ground his political ideas in these scriptural principles, his views lead to untenable and preposterous conclusions. So for Stevens, to allow freedom of speech in society also means the obligation to grant freedom for egregious blasphemy, and freedom of religion must somehow imply the civil right to openly practice sexual perversions or pursue Sunday trading (Sabbath laws were actually welcomed by the working poor as liberation from slavery in the West!). But these conclusions are simply non-sequiturs. The idea that because people are not legally restrained from the *sin* of false worship (idolatry) by the state in a free society they must also not be restrained from the *crimes* of bestiality, or incest, or sodomy, is simply false and did not 'follow' for most people until well into the sexual revolution of the 1960s – in fact until very recently. The state can have good reason to

protect *freedom of speech* whilst at the same time *placing limits* on it by restraining blasphemy as a direct assault on the foundations of the social order. Once Christ and his Word can be openly blasphemed for example, how can oath-taking in God's name and on his Word have any binding or valid purpose in a court of law? Where open blasphemy against the ultimate sovereign is indulged as unimportant, the social order is already crumbling. Similarly, this is why in a country like England, *treason* is still restrained by law for the sake of the survival of the state – laws against treason are necessary for the state to protect itself. Likewise, the state may also have an interest in protecting *freedom of religion* whilst limiting that freedom to certain religions (i.e. banning certain violent or dangerous cults), and further, only certain aspects of the cultural practices of those religions to keep them within the bounds of the nation's law order – like excluding certain forms of jihadist Islamic teaching in Sharia law from schools and places of worship or banning female genital mutilation, or forbidding the practice of *sati* in Hinduism.

Contrary to Stevens' view, the state may protect these broad freedoms whilst quite legitimately restraining certain practices, including certain *sexual practices*, as offenses punishable by law. In short, there is nothing about the political idea of *religious freedom* that implies an "*in principle*" obligation to legally protect a civil 'freedom' to openly practice sexual perversions like incest, bestiality, homosexuality, or pederasty (most of which are still illegal in Britain), as Stevens appears to argue. In England and Wales for example, incest, even with consenting adults, is covered by the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. In Scotland the offence is against the Criminal Law (Consolidation) Act of 1995, which replaced the Incest and Related Offences Act of 1986. Of particular interest is that, prior to the 1986 Act, the law was based on the Incest Act of 1567 which incorporated into Scottish criminal law Chapter 18 of the book of Leviticus!<sup>2</sup>

Because the family is the basic creational social sphere and foundational unit of any society, *social order* is inextricably tied to *sexual order*, and so radical social revolutions have been and always will be directed at a reordering or redefining of sexual norms. A pervasively individualistic sexual order concerned with and regulated only by the idea of 'harm' rather than a communitarian and relational sexual order concerned with the impact of sexual behaviour on wider family and community, not just the individual, will produce a very different kind of society. From a Christian perspective, the structurally pluralistic state would therefore still have an interest in the nature and *direction* of sexual relationships and seek to privilege the familial norm by excluding certain forms of sexual deviance from enjoying legal sanction and protection. To fail to do so will corrode the social order – the Western world since the 1960s is living proof of that truth. Every society historically has protected its sexual norms (including the 'new' sexual norms of today) with legal sanction, which is why the new sexual order is introducing legislation in the West to de-privilege and now punish those found 'discriminating' against the new sexuality.

### **The criterion for public justice**

All this brings us to the heart of the question – the matter of a *criterion* for public justice, rights and freedoms. When the Christian engages these political questions where do we locate a basis for a free and just society? Where are the lines drawn and on whose authority? John Stevens doesn't offer an objective criterion for these things; his article simply makes a humanistic appeal to the nebulous principle of 'harm.' He writes, "*Society needs, of course, to draw some limits to personal freedom to prevent harm to others, but a genuinely tolerant plural society must seek to allow maximum freedom.*" Yet scripturally, the political role of the state as a *ministry of public justice* balancing freedom, moral responsibility and accountability, is legitimately grounded only in the *transcendent God*, not an arbitrary principle of harm dreamt up by society (Rom. 13). In other words, political life requires an

objective *ground for justice and freedom*, enabling us to define the idea of harm – for a society is defined by what it tolerates and refuses to tolerate! This obviously demands an ultimate *religious* foundation. It requires a *transcendent* definition of the true and the good – of the common good; it requires knowing the difference between a crime and a sin – for crimes may be sins but not all sins are crimes; it requires, not arbitrary lines and many law structures, but one law-order before which people are treated equally. What is that law to be? Who decides? A humanistic cultural elite, Theresa May, John Stevens? For the Christian, since the state is a sphere of authority instituted and delimited by God, it is God alone who defines, law, justice and freedom.

The *structural pluralism* a scripturally-directed Christian should pursue then, cannot involve the establishment or embrace of multiple 'sovereigns' – where social order is hopelessly grounded in many contradictory religious directions; radical sexual license is promoted in the name of freedom; an over-reaching state relates to other spheres as *parts to whole*; and the myth of a religiously "neutral" public space is endlessly perpetuated. The reality is that a scripturally-directed social order is *more tolerant* than any other socio-political system and has therefore birthed free and tolerant societies because it recognises that man is a *sinner* who cannot be saved by *politics* and regulation. Neither is history the arena of final judgment where all man's sins and failures must be righted by controls, social planning and manipulation, as is the case in many humanistic political theories. At the same time, scripturally-rooted political philosophy also recognises that toleration in any society can *only go so far* before that society destroys itself. Indeed the radical pluralism advocated by Stevens can only produce *intolerance* and decay because it destroys the foundation for a *common discourse* which is the indispensable condition and basis for the existence and continuance of civil society. All that radical moral, religious and legal pluralism can produce is disparate groups shouting at one another demanding their narcissistic rights. That is our troubling cultural direction today.

The simple though uncomfortable fact is that no society can be governed and rooted in more than one *ultimate commitment* – that's logic 101. Public justice and political freedom in the West historically, did not mean what John Stevens advocates today in the name of *pluralism*. The very idea of freedom already *presupposes direction* – i.e. freedom *from what* and *to be what*? Freedom assumes a context in which good ends are chosen and people are left unmolested in pursuing them. Thus freedom in the Christian West never meant freedom for the creation of a parallel Islamic legal system as presently operates in the UK with over eighty *sharia* tribunals; it never meant freedom to promote blasphemy or openly practice and celebrate sexual perversion and thereby a constitutional "*freedom*" for treason and the subversion of the Christian social order; it never meant freedom to practice any religion or custom unrestricted by biblically-informed law; it never meant freedom to murder the unborn or elderly or to redefine marriage as ordained by God. It meant freedom to live in peace and security within a Christianized law-order that allowed maximal freedom within the boundaries of a broadly scriptural definition of the true and the good. This was necessary because freedom always presupposes being *related* back to something. A man floating through space is not free to move because he is unrelated to a planetary body. We are free only as we are related back to something above and beyond ourselves. That will either be the triune God and his Word or that Word will be substituted for something else. Yet Christians know Christ clearly claims to be the *only source* of true freedom – for if the son sets you free, you shall be free indeed (Jn. 8:36).

Mr. Stevens has repeatedly shown he doesn't understand that every social order *is a religious establishment* with a *source of sovereignty* rooted in a *divinity concept* to which that society is being related - be it Christian, Islamic, secular humanist or pagan. This religious foundation provides the basis for that society's criterion of freedom and justice. There is no disestablishment of religion possible in any



society, only a *change of religious commitments*. No civilized society can *tolerate*, never mind *promote*, a direct assault on its most foundational commitments and expect to survive. The unrelenting assault on Christian foundations in Britain, that has all too often been aided and abetted by a compromised church, has been and is an attack on its very life – it is for this reason that the UK is facing profound social decay, political instability and even severe internal threats with a growing Islamic insurgency. No secular peace will emerge from John Stevens' naïve egalitarian political vision – only tyranny. Freedom is possible only when we are related back to the transcendent God as our *appeal beyond the state* and its whims. Without this appeal, truth, freedom and justice are what the state says and enacts. Freedom cannot be defended simply on the ground that we need to give people the right to sin and harm themselves – this is a radical and unscriptural individualism. Our actions can be an assault on God, his order and deeply affect others. Freedom must be circumscribed by the *Word of God*, to be worthy of the name.

### **The disaster of moral equivalency**

Tim Farron's resignation and tragic situation does clearly reveal that the religious commitment of Britain has shifted and consequently Christians are increasingly faced with exclusion, ostracism and political trials for heresy against the new religious order. We must not fear this situation, but confront our times with boldness, compassion and confidence in Christ and the gospel.

However, John Stevens' advice for Christians in navigating political philosophy and engaging cultural and political questions is badly misguided and very misleading for the church. It is noticeable that the common thread in Stevens' argument regarding Christianity and the public square is oft repeated – sin and righteousness should be given *equal treatment* in the public space. That is, he tells us we need to protect people's '*right to sin*' and be as concerned with protecting those freedoms as we are with advancing our own. So for Stevens if we are upset and offended at the exclusion of Tim Farron and his views being discriminated against, we should be *equally appalled* by the misguided efforts of certain Christians to privilege Christian truth and morality and deprive the LGBTQ community of their sexual license and 'marriage' rights by trying to impose our morality on them in the social order. Indeed, as this writer understands Stevens, homosexuals and queer activists (and logically a host of other radicals) should find Christians fighting alongside them to defend their civil rights to practice and promote their sins in peace.

One can't help but wonder how that kind of argument would have gone over in another context with one of the founders of modern evangelicalism, William Wilberforce, a lifelong politician and legislator. "*William, let these man-stealers, slave-traders and murderers alone to practice their sin in peace. We should protect their civil right to trade in human flesh (as has been done in most societies throughout history), because William, we should not impose our biblical morality on others in the public square – that would be illiberal. No William, just focus on evangelism and point these poor slaves to the coming eschatological kingdom!*" We might pose the same kind of scenario regarding the evils of abortion, prostitution, euthanasia, pornography and the like. Are Christians really to cease and desist from seeking a privileging of Christ's lordship and God's law in these matters? The cultural and political consensus of the early nineteenth century was against Wilberforce regarding the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans, yet he fought for the privileging of biblical truth not just for slaves (Ex. 21:16; 1 Tim. 1:10), but for every area of life in his cultural and moral reforms. If the Christian pluralists object that the slavery example is unfair, that slavery was doing people 'harm' and of course it should have been opposed, are we to conclude that abortion, blasphemy, sexual debauchery and perversion, euthanasia and the like are doing no harm?

Stevens and the Christian pluralists like him, in rebuking Christians fighting for righteousness in the public space, are really drawing a disturbing *moral equivalence* between the exclusion of Tim Farron by liberal progressive secularists and the attempted privileging of Christian truth and law in the political sphere by some Christians, which if successful, would by definition exclude the values of some others in political life. This comparison is unacceptable for several reasons. First, by drawing such an equivalence, Stevens is positing the existence of value judgments that *transcend God's own Word-revelation*. How can there be a human value judgment (or law) that stands in judgment over God's definition of truth, justice, freedom and the good of man? How can what God calls perversion, murder, or evil be for the common good, or have the right to equal protection along with righteousness? Is it wrong for God to insist that his creational norms be followed? Is it wrong for the Christian to pursue the positivization of those norms in laws for the public space and social life of man? Since all law is the legislation of morality or is procedural thereto, someone's morality is always being legislated. Why should this *not be* God's objective moral norms for human flourishing? What is the source of Stevens' value judgment that it is wrong for Christians to seek the suppression of sin and evil in favour of privileging God's law in political life? Those judgments are certainly not drawn from Scripture. St. Paul is crystal clear regarding the civil function of God's transcendent moral law in 1 Timothy 1:8-11, which Paul declares is consistent with the gospel. The law's civil function is to *restrain evil*. God does not require that his law only be obeyed if it is obeyed by a converted heart. On the contrary its function with the non-believer is to restrain wickedness and discipline society by bringing just retribution on those who assault God, his creation order and their fellow man, by their evil deeds. The law thus functions as a teaching device and shapes people's lives in all cultural life – including providing the context for a receptivity to the gospel (Rom. 7:7-12).

A second difficulty with Stevens' moral equivalency regarding the exclusion of Farron's Christian convictions and excluding, for example, sharia law or de-privileging a pagan sexual vision of society, is that to discriminate against Mr. Farron's convictions is to set aside the foundations of British civil society; it is to exclude the biblical vision of society that bequeathed maximal freedom under Christian law in favor of a tyranny of man's law that will police not just criminal acts but people's thoughts. Then third, to exclude Tim Farron (as indicative of excluding Christianity from the public space) is in fact to ban true love, freedom and justice as defined by God, in favour of man's social justice and freedom which is in fact slavery. We either believe that Christ is life and freedom or we don't. We either believe his law is love and his gospel is peace or we don't. We either believe his Word is true and binding on all men or we don't. We either believe that the culture of Christ is superior to the culture of all other gods or we don't.

In sum, John Stevens' article does not represent a Christian social or political vision, but more closely approximates the liberty, fraternity and equality of the French Revolution, indebted to ancient Greece and Rome, where the secular state is meant to function as a religiously neutral (an inherent impossibility) arbitrator between various cults, but where in reality man's loyalty and homage is paid to man enlarged in the body politic – in short, the religion of statism. Yet Rome's fall was notorious and France's secular, pluralist revolution led only to tyranny and dictatorship! The maximal freedom bequeathed to the world by the West was *Christian freedom*, rooted in the inheritance of Christendom and the magisterial Reformation which we are being urged to leave behind by Stevens, whilst the abortive attempt to find a foundation for social order and civil liberty in radical pluralism is grounded in a humanistic and utopian myth, as is the ideal of a religiously neutral state. Thus when Stevens wants to "*draw the line*" on man's freedom to sin somewhere, he does so in a completely arbitrary fashion and without reference to the Word of God.

## Conclusions

It has never been and never will be possible for the Christian to serve Christ *and* Caesar (for that would be idolatry), but that doesn't mean the Christian can't serve Christ in political life. Rather we must serve Christ the lord faithfully in the totality of life and in every sphere. Leaving our churches Sunday to go to work, even in political government on Monday morning, does *not* mean we have left a supposedly 'sacred' realm to now function by a different set of standards, laws and norms in a purportedly 'secular' realm. Christ's jurisdiction is *total*. Notice that the separation of the institutional jurisdictions of church and state were present even in the Older Covenant where the king was not permitted to serve as priest. But that principle in no way separates religion or Christ's lordship from the state, or Christianity from shaping cultural and political life. Rather it rightly distinguishes the spheres of authority of church and state in their respective service to God. This is why the US President swears his oath of office on the Bible; it is why the Bible sits under the dispatch box in the Houses of Parliament; and it is why our Queen Elizabeth II swore an oath to uphold the law and gospel of Christ – Christ's kingdom is not limited to the church, but found in the family, school, the state and every social institution where God is honoured and glorified. To fail to see this and to pursue a pluralist vision (i.e. one that is not simply structural but *directional* in religious, moral and legal terms); a vision that does not privilege Christ's gospel and God's law-Word for all men in the social order is not only to despise God, it is to hate and despise our fellow man and fail to love our neighbour – for love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10).

One is forced to ask, what other disasters will befall us in our land before, not only politicians, but church leaders, will wake up to the cost of apostasy from Christ and cease from teaching rebellion against God's law-Word in the public sphere. Jesus warned that disobeying God's law and teaching others to do likewise would make a man least in the kingdom of heaven – that's a reference to *believers* teaching disobedience. So at what point does political pluralism cross into the territory condemned by Paul, that those who approve and applaud systems of false worship and sanction sexual immorality (in society) are under greater condemnation than those who actually practice it (Rom. 1). All Christians who want to be faithful to the lordship of Jesus Christ and who want to love their neighbor as God commands would do well to shun the counsel of those who claim that man in his social organization in the state is not under Christ and the revealed law-Word of God.

The only way forward in our current crisis is not a capitulation to radical pluralism but the faithful application of God's Word to all of life. John Stevens rightly bemoans the hypocrisy of an intolerant, progressive, secular-liberal society that hounds a man like Tim Farron, but he does not see that the ecclesiasticizing of God's Word not only *politicizes* the church, but *calls forth* the very aggressive secularity that persecutes us. When we fail to bring the clear light of God's Word to bear upon political and cultural life in the church pulpit, Christians will go their own way in these matters and become *politicized* with views un-submitted to that Word-revelation. They will then be intolerant of preaching that challenges their cultural and political views rooted in humanistic assumptions. Moreover, by imprisoning the Word of God as a *word for the church* only (i.e. to ecclesiasticize that Word in a spiritual or so-called redemptive kingdom), all the other spheres of life (the so-called common kingdom) are encouraged to go their own anti-Christian way and the public space becomes thoroughly humanistic and aggressively secular. As a consequence it is we Christians who are largely responsible for where our culture is today because we have forsaken the Lord, imprisoned his Word in the church institute, and so called forth an anti-Christian social order. Soon enough, that secular order will no longer tolerate even our ecclesiasticized Word, our private-sphere Bible, and will start to tell us which parts are acceptable to teach in our families and churches and which parts are not. So yes, let's pray for revival in our country,

but be sure our prayers do not partake in the blasphemy of our age, by banishing the Word of God from the public life of the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Stevens, "Tim Farron's Resignation: How Should Evangelicals Respond To The Illiberalism Of Progressive Secular Liberalism?" *John Stevens*, last modified June 20 2017, <http://www.john-stevens.com/2017/06/tim-farrons-resignation-how-should.html?m=1>.

<sup>2</sup> See, "Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee - Adult Consensual Incest" Scottish Parliament. Accessed June 30, 2017. <http://www.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Petitions%20briefings%20S4/PB16-1599.pdf>.