

A Loving Civilization: A Political Ecology that Promotes Overall Well-Being

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We often think of love in terms of personal relations. In other words, we think love is expressed one to one or one to a few. At times, we might reflect on what love means when expressed more broadly, beyond the one or few. We wonder what love looks like between communities, for instance. We may ask, “How can our group love that group?”

I want to explore what love might mean on a grander scale. This essay explores the possibility of a *civilization* oriented around love. One might call it a politics of love, but “politics” almost inevitably points one to political parties, issues, or elections. In this essay, I’ll use the phrase “a loving civilization.” I not only think about love between individuals and communities. I ask about the overall framework – worldview, metaphysic, paradigm, or whatever you like – necessarily for all-encompassing love.

The label “loving civilization” will likely sound novel. It will strike my fellow Christians as unfamiliar. Some might think establishing a loving civilization a noble goal but regard it unrealistic, practically speaking. I hope to show that establishing a civilization oriented around love is possible. At the least, we can make actual progress toward its reality. And assuming a particular eschatology, I will argue a civilization oriented around love is realizable.

The Kingdom of God?

The New Testament phrases *basilea theou* and *basilea ouranos* play a central role in how Jesus thought about God’s activity in the world. English-speakers often translate the first ancient Greek phrase, “kingdom of God,” and the second, “kingdom of heaven.” “Kingdom” connects easily to political themes, of course, in the sense of human governing. But there is strong biblical support for the idea God’s active care extends to other creatures, nature, and all creation.¹ All that God creates might be considered potentially part of the *basilea theou* and *ouranos*.

¹ A number of books on Scripture and ecology have been published in recent decades. As one example, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology* (Waco, Tx.: Baylor University Press, 2010).

Problems arise, however, when translating *basilea* “kingdom.” Kings have earned a bad reputation. Monarchs have been power-hungry, destructive, oppressive, and self-centered. Political systems based on monarchies allow little to no place for contributions by the common person, let alone the last and least. Consequently, “kingdom” has negative connotations for many today.

Most contemporary people prefer democratic political systems over monarchical ones. In fact, many regard democratic forms of government morally superior, because democracies assume all citizens have voice. Democracies have leaders, of course. Few think absolute anarchy is morally defensible. Political systems with necessary roles for leaders and followers, governors and citizens seem to many people best overall.²

Nations with a history of monarchical rule appreciate the pomp and circumstance associated with kings, queens, and royal families. Consequently, these nations sometimes retain monarchies but afford them little actual power. Those nations place governing power in the hands of elected leaders, which shows the preference for democracies over monarchies I noted earlier.

Given the negative associations many have with monarchies, I recently asked friends to propose replacement phrases for the “kingdom of God.” English speakers are not required, of course, to translate *basilea* “kingdom.” And if most have negative associations with kings and queens, we have incentive to search for better language about God’s *polis*.

Here’s a partial list of phrases my friends suggested to replace “kingdom of God.” As you read each, ponder their strengths and weaknesses....

Alternative Life, Blessing of God, Community of Love, Community of the Divine, Covenant Community of Christ, Domain of God, God's Dwelling Place, God's Household, God's Loving Ecosystem, God's Loving Way of Life, God's New Order of the Spirit, Great Love Consortium, Kindom of God, Love's Availing Power, Loving Influence of God, Reign of God, Republic of God, and Unknown Country of God.

I’m attracted to alternatives that either explicitly or implicitly place an emphasis upon love. This attraction undoubtedly stems from my view that love is first and foremost God’s way of acting and being. “God is love,” says John. I think first of love when I consider the revelation of God expressed in

² For arguments in favor of the moral superiority of democracy over authoritarianism and anarchy, see Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018).

Jesus, and I've written a great deal on the value of thinking love comes logically first among God's attributes.³ Jesus said the greatest commandments revolve around love, which suggests to me and to many that love is the center of Christian ethics. Biblical writers often point to love as the way we ought to orient ourselves toward God, others, and ourselves.

Some may think it's unhelpful to replace "kingdom" with the language of love. To them, "love" is wishy-washy, weak, or a weasel word. Others defend kingdom language by arguing that a divine King is not like human monarchs. God is supremely wise, active, and good. God stands as a prophetic alternative to human regimes of oppression. Besides, they argue, retaining "kingdom" as the preferred translation of *basilea* keeps our focus on God as authority. "Jesus is Lord" is an important contrast to "Caesar is Lord."

I see advantages to having language that describes God as supreme rather than equal. And I want to retain the idea that God has authority shaped by love. I think it's important to use leadership language when talking about God's loving activity. To my mind, however, "kingdom" carries negative connotations not overcome by saying God is a "loving king."

There's a further issue to consider. When Jesus used the *basilea* phrases, he rarely used them in relation to authority and rule. The *basilea* is like yeast, a mustard seed, a field, a pearl, etc. He said the *basilea* was within his listeners or "at hand," without implying we find it in the political structures of his day.

In his *basilea* illustrations, analogies, and metaphors, Jesus seems to suggest God's authority is influential but noncoercive. It has an effect in us and creation without being controlling. The *basilea* is not top down. It always seem to be welling up from below, from all over, and especially from the least expected places and people. Whatever we want to say about God's leadership, I suggest we say it's winsome, wooing, calling, and uncontrolling.

Roger Haydon Mitchell and friends coined the word – "kenarchy" – to capture the political dimensions I'm addressing as a loving civilization. The first half of *kenosis* comes from the New Testament word often translated as self-giving or self-emptying love. The second half comes from *arche*, which refers to ordering social structures. Mitchell explains it this way, "By forming the word kenarchy

³ See, for instance, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IntVarsity Press Academic, 2015), Ch. 7.

to refer to the kingdom of God, we are deliberately referring the political character to the message of Jesus and reapplying it today. The message of Jesus is a politics of peace, of peace through love..."⁴

I agree with Mitchell about the primacy of love for politics, when "politics" refers to the *polis*. I believe God invites us to cooperate and contribute in the loving civilization God leads. As Leader, God does not sit on the sidelines or watch from a distance. This Leader of Love exerts influence at all levels of complexity, to all creatures great and small, in the private and public domains. God's leading is powerful but not coercive, universal and yet particular. Rather than governing through threats or violence, the omnipresent and Leader of a loving civilization draws, calls, invites, warns, transforms, guides, woos, and more.

The *basilea theou/ouranos* is a God-guided loving civilization.

What is Love?

For the phrase "loving civilization" to make sense, we need to be clear what "love" means. Love is notoriously difficult to define. In fact, many use the word but few attempt a definition! Those who *do* define love often fail to use their definition consistently. Sigmund Freud was right when he said, "'love' is employed in language" in an "undifferentiated way."⁵ Theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop called love a "weasel word."⁶

The various meanings of "love" sometimes conflict. At one moment, "love" is synonymous with romantic relationships. At another, to "love" means to desire. Sometimes to "love" is to feel warm affection for someone. And sometimes to "love" is to act for another's good. I could add more. When it comes to love, confusion reigns.⁷

In light of this diversity and as an attempt to draw together what I think helpful in various meanings, I offer my own definition. I define love in this way: "To love is to act intentionally, in relational

⁴ Roger Haydon Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arran, eds., *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 3-4.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Random House, 1994), 49.

⁶ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 9.

⁷ Jules Toner, *The Experience of Love* (Washington: Corpus Instrumentorum, 1968), 8.

(sympathetic/empathetic) response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being.”⁸ Briefly exploring my definition’s three phrases seems important on the way to explaining what I mean by “a loving civilization.”

The phrase “to act intentionally” points to action and motives. As I see it, love is not a feeling, although feelings often play a role in acts of love. A lover *does* something. And an act of love involves some deliberation, even if this deliberation is fleeting.⁹

The phrase, “to act intentionally” addresses intentions. A lover acts purposely. We should not regard an action loving if accidental or unintentional. Acts done with the motive to harm should not be labeled “acts of love,” for instance, even if those acts have beneficial consequences. To put it another way, the lover acts prospectively in the hope to promote well-being. Motives matter.

I use “to act intentionally” to account also for the self-determination – freedom – inherent in love. Lovers are choosers and to some degree responsible for their actions. Freedom is always limited, however. Concrete circumstances, environmental constraints, bodily factors, genetics, neurology, historical pressures, and other conditions limit what is genuinely possible in any moment. In other words, freedom is always conditioned.¹⁰ But acts of love require that lovers have genuine albeit limited freedom.

The phrase “in relational (sympathetic/empathetic) response to others (including God),” covers a range of important issues. The relational aspect suggests love requires more than one. Agents beyond the lover influence her. Love is relational; lovers respond.

The phrase “sympathetic/empathetic response” accounts for the role emotions play in love. That role may be minor or major. We sometimes describe strong positive emotions in terms of “affections” or “affection for another.” But love is more than simply feeling affection. After all, we may have affection for someone without seeking her well-being (e.g., a romantic stalker).

⁸ I provide a more expansive explanation of my love definition in *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2010). I employ this definition or something close to it in many publications.

⁹ Robert Kane makes a similar argument in *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 23.

¹⁰ Daniel Day Williams makes this point nicely in *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 116.

Some scholars follow Plato by saying love is desire. Soren Kierkegaard thinks of love this way when he says, “Love is a passion of the emotions.”¹¹ Augustine presupposes this view when he directs readers to “love, but see to it what you love.”¹²

I think love includes but is more than desire. To express love, we should sometimes act contrary to our yearnings or wants. We might have strong desires to get revenge, for instance, but love calls us to forgive. We might want to express ourselves sexually in an illicit way, but love calls us to exert self-control to avoid unhealthy sex.

The phrase in my love definition, “to others (including God),” points to my conviction that we cannot understand love well without reference to divine activity.¹³ God is the source of all love, as I define it. God acts first in each moment to empower and inspire creaturely love. As the Ideal Recipient and Ideal Contributor, God relationally receives all information, feelings, and activities, and God responds by empowering and calling creatures to seek the common good.¹⁴ To put it the Apostle John’s language, we can love because God first loves us (1 Jn 4:19).

God is never the only actor, however, to whom creatures respond. Lovers relate to creaturely others. While God is the source, power, and inspiration for creaturely love, God is not love’s sufficient cause.¹⁵ The “others” to whom lovers respond need not be human. We can respond to animals, other creatures, our environments, and more. Whether our love can or will be reciprocated by others is another issue.

The final phrase of my love definition, “to promote overall well-being,” points to the beneficial consequences at which love aims. Overall well-being includes the good of enemies and strangers, families and friends, societies, animals, amphibians, fish, insects, and other creatures, inanimate creation, basic elements of existence, and even God! Love pertains to the multifarious dimensions of existence.¹⁶ The word “overall” suggests that our assessment of how love might promote good includes

¹¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses* Howard and Edna Hong, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 117.

¹² Augustine, *Commentaries on the Psalms*, 90, 31, 5.

¹³ I compare the theologies of love in Anders Nygren, Augustine, and Clark Pinnock before offering my own in *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010).

¹⁴ I explain what it means for God to be ideal recipient and contributor in *Defining Love*, Ch. 6.

¹⁵ I address the importance of denying that God can act as a sufficient cause in *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, Ch. 7.

¹⁶ Partha Dasgupta uses the phrase “pluralist outlook” for what I call the multifarious dimensions of existence. See his book, *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14.

but reaches beyond our own good. In other words, “self-love” has an appropriate place in the economy of “overall well-being.” But sometimes love also requires self-sacrifice. A life well lived includes many aspects of well-being.

The aim for “overall” well-being points to the justice dimension of love. Actions that privilege the few to the detriment of the whole are not loving. Actions that deny basic rights and goods are not loving. Cornell West is fond of saying justice is what love looks like in public.¹⁷ I like to say love seeks overall flourishing, and acting for the common good includes seeking justice for all.

Mention of overall well-being raises questions of epistemology: “How can we know *which* actions promote overall well-being?” After all, we are localized creatures with limited perspectives. We can’t perceive the whole, let alone know with certainty what’s best for our particular circumstances.

As I see it, only a universal being – the omnipresent Lover who gives and receives perfectly – can assess well what love requires. This being is God. God experiences creation moment by moment, assessing what love requires in each circumstance, as new information and relationships emerge.¹⁸ And God acts creatively to empower and inspire creatures to love – promote overall well-being – in light of all God knows.

Localized creatures like you and me evaluate what love requires given the widest range of information we can gather. When doing so, we cannot know with certainty our evaluations are accurate. We can get some sense, however, of what overall well-being requires because we have relate to other creatures and to the One who knows all creation. A “darkened glass” may obscure our view (1 Cor. 13:12), but we can see to some degree.

Love takes many forms. It would be impossible to list them all! Theologians and philosophers sometimes highlight major categories of love. They speak of *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*, for instance, and many more.¹⁹ We need so many activities to promote overall well-being in a civilization oriented around love.

¹⁷ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 271.

¹⁸ On this issue, I’m appealing to the idea that God is relational and experiences time sequentially, moment by moment. This open and relational God is omniscient, in the sense of knowing all that can be known. But God also gains knowledge each moment as new information arises. On this view of God, see various books in the traditions of open theology and process theology.

¹⁹ I define and describe *agape*, *eros*, and *philia* in my books *Defining Love* and *The Nature of Love*.

Those who love with consistency develop habits of love. Good habits help future decisions about what love requires. Loving decisions and habits generate a virtuous character. Those with virtuous characters better assess what love requires in any circumstance, but their assessment can still be erroneous. Saints are not omniscient.

The idea that we can develop loving habits and virtuous character through consistent responses to God's love is a clue to the theme of this essay. I believe that societies with loving traditions and positive structures can develop in response to God's leading. And these societies can comprise a loving civilization.

In the ensuing segments, I'll contrast the features of a loving civilization with features of civilizations that do not promote overall well-being. If we are to respond well to God's call to live lives of love, we must replace ways of living that undermine with ways that promote the common good.

A Loving Civilization Promotes Relationality over Individualism

The members of a loving civilization see themselves as interrelated with others. By "interrelated," I mean these members realize that their actions affect others – both human and nonhuman – and others affect them. In fact, all creatures are inevitably shaped by their relationships. We humans are selves engaged in relational responses; we are not isolated individuals impervious to others.

The Apostle Paul used the body analogy to say this. He argued the body's many parts must function together for the body to thrive. One part should not say to another, "I don't need you!" Paul assumes, in other words, the good of the one and the good of the whole intertwine. The leadership of that body, he said, is Christ (1 Cor. 12:15-26).

It's common to claim individualism emerged as a philosophy in modernity. But the problems of individualism precede the modern period. They manifest in the penchant some have for being self-oriented or thinking in terms of personal gain at the expense of others. Thinking, "I must defeat you" or "we must defeat them" prevails in civilizations oriented around individualism. Civilizations with individualism as their orienting concern encourage people or groups to secure short-term power or pleasure instead of long-term flourishing for all people, creatures, and the planet.

A recent poll of Americans indicated that 75% thought the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” comes from the Bible.²⁰ While one can find biblical passages that speak of proper care for oneself, the preponderance of biblical passages speak of neighbor love, community love, and even enemy love. The common biblical injunction to “love one another” assumes the priority of relationality and serves as a core belief for a loving civilization.

While lovers realize their own well-being is affected by the well-being of others, a loving civilization also affirms proper self-love. A person’s own needs, desires, and dreams aren’t ignored. Instead, citizens of a loving civilization consider their own good when acting for the good of the whole. Self-love is rightly called “love” when promoting one’s own well-being has overall well-being in mind. Actions to benefit oneself at the overall expense of others are not loving. Lovers seek to integrate the personal and political, the individual and the social, the one and the many.

The justice element of love plays a key role in discerning how the good of one or a few aligns with the common good. A loving civilization has no place for systems and individuals that act only for the good of one or a few to the obvious detriment of the many. Radical individualism leads to income inequality and resource hogging. A loving civilization promotes care for all people, communities, and societies. And it recognizes special care for the neediest.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis spoke of the relationality aspect central to what I call a loving civilization. He uses the phrase “integral ecology.” “Since everything is closely interrelated, and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis,” he says, “I suggest that we now consider some elements of an integral ecology, which clearly respects human and social dimensions.”²¹ Francis develops these ideas in ways that fit nicely with claims about relationality I’ve made above.

In sum, a loving civilization assumes the centrality of relationships.

A Loving Civilization Prioritizes Interiority over Mechanism

²⁰ George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point: How Coming Cultural Shifts will Change Your Life* (Regal Books, 2001), 90.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 137.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html [Accessed 3/7/19].

Our current civilization is increasingly shaped by machines and technology. They can be helpful. But the benefits that machines and technology provide can tempt us to think we, other creatures, and the world are machines. They tempt us to think our good comes in promoting the mechanization of society. And they can tempt us to spend time away from plants, animals, wilderness, and open spaces. A loving civilization rejects the mechanization mentality, and it prioritizes the inner life and natural world.

The scientific revolution and computer age have affected the way many think about what it means to be a creature. The underlying thought patterns of many shifted from animism to mechanism, from thinking of creatures as organisms to thinking of them as computers.²² Instead of seeing creatures and creation as alive, ensouled, responsive, or aware, many now regard the world and its creatures – including humans – as machines.

Charlie Brooker, the co-creator of the popular Netflix series *Black Mirror*, seems to buy into the mechanization mystique. “It looks like we're going to have to rethink our position in the world over the next four decades or so,” says Brooker, “as we begin to cede more and more control to automation and computers. We've got to work out what our purpose is. And if we've got [a machine] that thinks it knows better than us what we should be doing, maybe we should start listening to it.”²³

In contrast to Brooker, a loving civilization sees the purpose of life in terms of love. And love requires interiority. A loving civilization regards creatures as valuing beings rather than machines. Creatures feel, enjoy, and respond intentionally. Machines do not possess these capacities, because they are constructed of entities externally related to one another.

Perhaps the best overall framework to make sense of creatures as possessing interiority is the organismic philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.²⁴ Instead of regarding existence as comprised entirely of substances ricocheting off one another steel balls in an arcade game, Whitehead believed we and all beings are fundamentally experiential. He agreed with William James who said existing beings are “drops of experience.”²⁵

²² On this point, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1991) 2014).

²³ Matthew Reynolds, “Charlie Brooker on tech's next terrifying Black Mirror moment,” *Wired* (12/28/17) <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/black-mirror-tech-future> (Accessed 2/7/18)

²⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978; orig. ed., 1929).

²⁵ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 172, 185.

Wendell Berry identifies the interiority issue when he says, “the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with not objects to be exploited.”²⁶ Subjects have interiority. We make better sense of both simple and complex creatures if we place priority upon mentality, response, choice, valuing, and more. The mechanization mentality ignores or even denies these capacities fundamental to organisms.

Seeing existence as comprised of subjects with interiority provides a conceptual framework for understanding love for all others, human and nonhuman. This interior dimension is a way of talking about our feeling and expressing love. And humans are not the only creatures capable of this. In loving civilizations, members respect the feelings and bodies of humans and nonhumans.

While machines and technology can be useful in the work to promote overall well-being, we must avoid thinking of creatures as machines. And we must spend time with other creatures and nature more broadly to remind ourselves of the priority of interior life. Without seeing ourselves and others firstly as subjects with interiority, little progress can be made to establish a loving civilization.

A loving civilization assumes the priority of interiority.

A Loving Civilization Sees Creation as Intrinsically Valuable and Opposes Consumerism

We cannot find true happiness by collecting and consuming stuff. Amassing large amounts of material objects is unhealthy. It’s not good for us; it’s not good for others. Overconsumption especially harms the poorest humans and the most vulnerable creatures on the planet. When we overconsume, we fail to recognize that others have intrinsic value.

The biggest indication that our current civilization overconsumes is the environmental crisis caused by abuse of creation and climate change. This crisis is real! A host of indicators, organizations, and experts agree: our planet and its creatures are in dire straits. Multiple reports from reputable groups like the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change²⁷ and the National Climate Assessment²⁸ say this. Such reports detail the severity and urgency of our world’s health.

²⁶ Quoted in Derrick Jensen, *Listening to the Land* (White River, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2004), 2.

²⁷ See the report at <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>. Accessed 3/5/19.

²⁸ See the report at <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>. Accessed 3/5/19

Pope Francis summarizes our precarious situation well: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” A loving civilization addresses both crises.

Two factors seemed to have played major roles in bringing us to our current crisis: ignorance and greed/overconsumption. Many humans were not aware of how their lifestyles negatively affected other species and the climate. In recent decades, however, this ignorance has largely been overcome. We now know that our planet is heating, and we know our ways of living contribute in major ways to this heating.

The second factor – greed/overconsumption – has not yet been overcome. Instead of realizing that greater wealth does not bring greater happiness, many hurt themselves and others in the quest for more money. Instead of electing leaders serious about guiding civilization to curb overconsumption, we elect those whose policies exacerbate the environmental crisis. In fact, instead of practicing the self-control often necessary for love, people in the USA elect leaders intent on protecting our “American way of life!”

The basic resources required for life are becoming polluted, diluted, or contaminated. The air, water, and food that humans and other creatures need are less reliably available in clean forms. Overhunting leads to fewer animals on the planet, including extinctions. Rising sea levels reduce livable coastal land in various parts of the world. Overpopulation has become a legitimate concern on a planet that has far more people living today than 100 years ago. I could go on...

Indigenous/Native American theologian Randy Woodley nicely explains what’s at issue. “For millennia, the whole of creation has been producing enough energy to allow limited consumption,” says Woodley. “Humanity, in just a few generations, has accelerated consumption exponentially... As each new season brings increased natural disasters, such as floods, violent storms, acid rain, and serious global water shortages, it appears we have blocked the Creator’s blessing in significant ways.”²⁹

One of the most knowledgeable and passionate voices, Bill McKibben, urges us to express the self-control necessary for what I call a loving civilization. McKibben’s proposals to combat climate

²⁹ Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, Mic.: Eerdmans, 2012), 127.

change are realistic and practical. He points to the power of everyday lovers to guide us: “The movers and shakers on our planet aren't the billionaires and generals. They are the incredible numbers of people around the world filled with love for neighbor and for the earth who are resisting, remaking, restoring, renewing, and revitalizing.” In a loving civilization, the voices at the margins, at the bottom, and among the ordinary make a real difference!

I believe more people will be motivated to curb overconsumption and combat climate change when they realize a loving civilization considers all creatures intrinsically valuable. To put it negatively, what we do to one another matters little if the purpose of life is consumption and accumulation. We can treat one another as valueless. By contrast, members of a loving civilization assume all creatures are intrinsically valuable and therefore must be respected. They assume the smallest and the least have value too. If the work of love seeks *overall* well-being, we must consider what the well-being of all on the planet requires. Because all of life is intrinsically valuable.

A loving civilization assumes that all living creatures are intrinsically valuable.

Can an Uncontrolling God Establish a Loving Civilization?

When exploring the phrase “kingdom of God,” I claimed there are reasons to think God is better described as the leader of a loving civilization. I said God’s leadership style is not coercive, manipulative, or comprised of threats. God listens, receives, and leads through uncontrolling love. To conclude this exploration of a loving civilization, I want to say a little more about this Lover’s influence and what our responses should be.

It’s common for Christians, Jews, and Muslims to say we ought to obey God. This call for obedience is appropriate, because I believe a loving God wants creatures to love. But the word “obey” is common to the kingdom language we earlier found unhelpful. “Obedience” strikes many as oppressive, domineering, and allowing no real contribution by the obedient. To many, “obedience” is synonymous with “blind obedience” and subservience. While it has a place, obedience language doesn’t fit well with the view God is a loving friend or patient guide.

I prefer the Apostle Paul’s language of “imitation.” In his letter to believers in Ephesus, Paul writes, “Imitate God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, as Christ loved us...” (Eph. 5:1-2a). Jesus’ revelation of love points to God as a perfectly loving Abba. Most Christians believe the clearest

revelation of God comes in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians believe they ought to be “Christ-like,” which means loving as Jesus did.

Imitating God as revealed in Jesus Christ means loving like God loves. If we think of God as a leader who dominates, manipulates, and barks out orders, we’ll likely our love ought to be the same. On the other hand, if we think that God’s leadership is passive, milquetoast, weak-willed, or flaccid, we might think our love should follow suit. Carl Schmitt was at least partly right when he said our view of God shape our view of how we and governments ought to act.³⁰

The life of Jesus suggests love is neither domineering nor dormant, neither controlling nor inactive, neither overruling nor weak-willed. Jesus listened, related, and communed with others, and in response acted decisively but uncontrollingly for what is good. Jesus acted in particular situations to promote overall well-being. Imitating God as revealed in the life of Jesus suggests our love ought also to be expressed in particular circumstances with the common good in mind.

When I think of imitating God’s work to establish a loving civilization, I’m reminded of Jesus’ words, “Seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you” (Mt. 6:33). How appealing these words sounds when we translate them, “Seek first God’s loving civilization!” How “this world” sounding too!

Jesus speaks of “seeking” to conclude his instructions about anxiety. We need not worry about what we will eat, drink, or wear, he says. God knows what we need. Besides, says Jesus, tomorrow will have its own worries. Seek a loving civilization instead.

In light of our current civilization – including selfish individualism, overconsumption, mechanistic thinking, environmental crises, and more – what should we make of Jesus’ instruction not to worry? Was Jesus a fatalist who thought we ought to seek a loving civilization, all the while knowing our actions make no difference? Is Jesus an isolationist who calls us to withdraw from civilization into small groups unconcerned with the common good? In short, would Jesus oppose the idea to change our lives and society in the effort to establish a loving civilization?

Not surprisingly, I don’t think Jesus was a fatalist or isolationist. And I think his instructions to establish a loving civilization were realistic rather than utopian. I interpret his instructions not to worry

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005 [1922]).

or be anxious are instructions that we avoid despair. I think he was pointing us to concern ourselves with the ways of love.

Admittedly, today despair is tempting. Hope can be hard to keep when the problems I've noted above are so great! In fact, many Christians are tempted to reject the idea of God's uncontrolling love and wish for divine power that singlehandedly restores and heals. They wonder, If God's loving leadership is always uncontrolling, how can we hope a loving civilization can be established?

If establishing a loving civilization were up to you and me alone, I'd also despair. I'm inconsistently loving, and suspect you are too. But if establishing a loving civilization were up to God alone, I'd also despair. A God who could singlehandedly stop genuine evil and alone establish a loving civilization ought to have done so already! I could not trust a God capable of unilaterally fixing our problems but who chooses instead to stand by and allow evil.³¹

My ultimate hope is in the steadfast love of God to persuade you, me, and others to cooperate with divine love. My hope is in God's action to establish a loving civilization, action that requires creaturely response. In response to God's empowering love, I believe we can join God to develop political ecologies with loving traditions and positive structures. We can cooperate with God's work to transform our own lives. And we can co-labor with God in the work to establish *shalom* throughout all creation.

When I'm tempted to despair, I remind myself of John Wesley's optimism of grace. In his sermon on eschatology called *General Spread of the Gospel*, Wesley writes, "In the same manner as God *has* converted so many to himself, without destroying their liberty, he *can* undoubtedly convert whole nations or the whole world. And it is as easy for him to convert a world as one individual soul."³²

Wesley believed God saves through the synergy of God acting and creatures cooperating. In the terms I've been using, Wesley would say God establishes a loving civilization through uncontrolling love that requires positive responses. Indispensable love synergy – between Creator and creation – is necessary for love to become widespread.³³

³¹ I explore the importance of thinking God's love *cannot* prevent evil singlehandedly in my more popular book, *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (Grasmere, Id.: SacraSage, 2019).

³² John Wesley, *General Spread of the Gospel*, Sermon 68, paragraph 12.

³³ I explain the meaning of "indispensable love synergy" in more detail in *God Can't*, ch. 5.

I also believe God's conversion of "whole nations or the whole world," as Wesley put it, makes best sense in light of what philosophers of science like me call "top-down causation." This phrase refers to how members of organized systems are influenced not only by less complex components and their own behavior. These members are also influenced by higher-level actors and factors. Causal influences flows both bottom up and top down.

If we think God exerts high-level influence as the necessary cause active at all levels of complexity, from the least complex to the most, we have a conceptual framework for thinking God's loving leadership influences all creation at all lower levels. *And* if we think higher order organisms – like you and me – can cooperate with God's loving leadership, we can imagine through top-down causation that our love can positively influence less complex creatures and organisms. In fact, this top-down causation framework provides a reason to think political systems (as we normally think of "political") can make a difference in establishing a loving civilization. After all, political systems, laws, and orders influence the whole as we carry them out.

Conclusion

More can and must be said about what a loving civilization entails. And much more must be said specifically about how it might be established. In this essay, I've argued Jesus' phrases *basilea theou* and *basilea ouranous* out to be understood today the call to establish a loving civilization. I've said love is best understood as acting intentionally, in response to God and others, to promote overall well-being. And I've offered several components of a loving civilization. Throughout, I've described God as this loving civilization's leader. Divine leadership is uncontrolling but influential, as God call us and all creatures to cooperate with this Loving Leader's work for the common good.

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