

The Divine Right Of Kings

The western world was dominated for centuries by an idea known as “the divine right of kings.” The idea that kings rule on earth as God’s representatives comes from the Apostle Paul who wrote: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

The founders who wrote the U.S. Constitution had some doubts about the divine rights of kings. They had seen too much cruelty and corruption on the part of European monarchs to believe such a thing. That’s why the Constitution they wrote rejects the idea of “rule by divine right” and provides instead for a system whereby citizens govern themselves. For Americans, the authority of the government comes from the “consent of the governed.” We don’t have rulers, we have public servants. These servants are chosen by the people they serve—we give them their power.

Of course power, even when conferred by the people, can have a corrupting influence on human character. That is one of the reasons the framers of the Constitution instituted several “separation” doctrines within the constitution. The “separation of powers,” for example, ensures that no one branch of government can trump the other two with a claim to absolute or exclusive power. Related to this is the “separation of church and state” doctrine which makes it impossible for any branch of government, or even government itself, to claim that it is an instrument of God in the world. In short, the framers wanted to create, in Lincoln’s words, a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

I bring all this up because of a comment made recently by Commerce Secretary Don Evans. Evans stated that President Bush believes he “was called by God to lead us through these times. His election was not an accident—it was a miracle.”

As we unpack the implications of his statement it would appear that we are faced with a new version of the “rule by divine right.” In this new version God works

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miraculously through the electoral process to establish the ruler he wants in power. At one level it may seem that the president serves at the “consent of the governed,” because we elected him. But at a deeper level this new form of divine appointment asserts he is really serving because God miraculously orchestrated the outcome of the election.

Obviously, all of us want leaders who pray for guidance and seek to be led by deeply held moral principles. But, this is something beyond that. If the president believes he was placed in office by God, then he is no longer accountable to the people. We are no longer the source of the president’s power. He does not serve at the consent of the governed but by divine decree. This may explain why we have been hearing that dissent or disagreement with the president is “un-American.”

This has always been a difficult balancing act for believers. What does God do in our world, and what has God left for us to do? For the moment, our Constitution answers at least part of that question this way: We elect our public servants, they serve by our consent, their power comes from the people, and they are answerable to us. Only God knows what will happen if this changes.

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