

# On Politics

## Introduction

The mission of the Church is not political in nature, but to make disciples through the preaching of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> However, as Christians we hold that “the Scriptures are the authoritative and normative rule and guide of all Christian life, practice, and doctrine,”<sup>2</sup> and so we think the Bible sufficiently informs us how to be involved in the political process. Therefore, instead of presenting a rigid list of political positions, this paper will present biblical principles for being active in the political affairs of our nation, help equip you to think through several political issues biblically, and propose a few questions for personal application.

## The Church and Politics Evangelicalism = Politics?

In the past few decades, evangelicalism has increasingly become identified by the world as not only a religious movement but also as a political one. Sadly, due to this political identity, many Christians and churches have become a stumbling block to millions of non-Christians sitting across the political aisle from them as Christ and his gospel oftentimes take a back seat in election season. This begs the question: should churches be so tied to the politics of either the left or the right? We think not.

As America slips further into a post-Christian culture, we maintain that the Church doesn't exist to work towards cultural change through political power, but “to worship and glorify God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, and “to serve him by faithfully doing his will in the earth.”<sup>3</sup> The mission of the church is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in order to make disciples of all peoples. When men's and women's hearts are transformed by the gospel, true cultural change is possible.

In stating what we believe the Church exists for, it would be a mistake to assume we are advocating that Christians withdraw from the

political process or not run for political office. To the contrary, we want to acknowledge the legitimacy of politics and government, as the Bible and Jesus himself testify. Our aim is to distinguish between the main purpose of the Church and legitimate political involvement of individual Christians as they seek to live out the clear implications of the gospel in this present world.

## Clarifying the Kingdoms

As we think through the issue of politics and the church, a key passage to consider is Matthew 22:15-22. In this passage some Pharisees ask Jesus a question designed to trap him. The question was a simple one, but his answer could be costly, if not dangerous.

*“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*  
*Matthew 22:17<sup>4</sup>*

Had Christ said “yes,” he would have been viewed as unpatriotic since the Jews despised the Roman government that ruled over them. If he said “no,” the Romans could have treated Jesus as a dangerous dissident. Instead, Jesus frustrated the Pharisees' attempt to entrap him and pointed to a different way in which God's people were to understand religion and government.

*But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”*  
*Matthew 22:18-21*

Christ's answer points to two spheres, or kingdoms, of power and influence; one being civil and the other spiritual. No longer were they to expect a government that was to rule over both the civil and religious affairs, as was the case under the Mosaic covenant. This was contrary to what Christ's disciples expected from him: a reestablished Jewish kingdom. Instead Christ stated that as citizens under Roman rule, using

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> What We Believe – The Scriptures (Sovereign Grace Ministries)

<sup>3</sup> What We Believe – The Church (Sovereign Grace Ministries)

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<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the monetary system and coins that belonged to Rome, they should pay Caesar what was rightfully his, and give to God what was God's. There is a clear distinction between these two entities.

Another passage to consider is Romans 13:1-7. In this passage the apostle Paul commands the believers in Rome to "be subject to (obey) the governing authorities" (13:1). He clearly states that civil governments have been appointed by God, in such a way that to resist the government is to resist God and incur judgment (13:2), and governments are "God's servants for your good" (13:4).<sup>5</sup> We also see that Paul instructs his readers to "pay taxes" (13:6), even though the Roman Empire was guilty of ungodly activity. This teaches that government is appointed by God and as Christians we are to submit to the God-given authority that the government possesses.

Another example to follow is found in Jeremiah. In a letter written to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, God commands them to:

*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

*Jeremiah 29:5-7*

Just as these Babylonian exiles were instructed to seek the welfare of their Babylonian city, we too should seek the welfare of the city and country we are passing through as we look for a

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<sup>5</sup> Clearly there are exceptions to this, as when Christians are commanded by the government to disobey God's revealed will as seen in Acts 5:27-29. But one must also remember that Acts 5 is in the context of the disciples having been given a direct charge not to "speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). To cease preaching would have meant direct disobedience to God's call on their lives to preach the gospel. Therefore, they rightly chose to obey God rather than man. In our country today, similar situations are hard to find. This verse cannot be used to justify civil disobedience regarding our "pet issues" that do not result in clear disobedience to God's Word. However, there may be instances of applying Act 5:29 in the future considering the possible collision of the rise of "hate speech" laws with the Church's duty to proclaim all of God's Word (like the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, for example).

better one to come.<sup>6</sup> And one of the ways we can seek the welfare of our country is to thoughtfully and prayerfully involve ourselves in the political affairs of our nation for the glory of God, all the while realizing that our hope isn't in the government, but in the God in whose hands the king's heart lies.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Prophetic Voice**

Anyone who has ever watched Christian television programming knows that it's common to hear ministers talking about politically charged issues. In fact, given the tone and emphasis, one might even think these issues are matters of first importance, even as important as the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.<sup>8</sup> This should not be the case. However, if a pastor is to preach the whole counsel of God<sup>9</sup>, he will most assuredly speak to issues that have political implications. And while the church can be very certain regarding its positions on some issues, there are many issues, even of great national importance, where the Bible is relatively silent. In these situations we should defer to principles of Christian liberty, and, rather than dictate nuanced policy, should provide a biblical framework for individuals to analyze the issues while emphasizing that we should remain loving and charitable to other Christians that come to different conclusions than we do.

Instead of preaching specific political positions as commandments, we think the Church should be a prophetic voice in the culture. By "prophetic voice," we mean being heralds of the truth of God's Word in the culture and testifying to the hope that is found in Jesus Christ.

An excellent example of a prophetic voice was Daniel. A godly Jew in exile and, as such, a recipient of God's instruction to seek the welfare of Babylon,<sup>10</sup> Daniel became a high official in King Nebuchadnezzar's court. After interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream which included a warning of impending judgment, Daniel did not offer an extended critique of his policies. Rather, he admonishes Nebuchadnezzar to turn from his sins:

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 2:11, Hebrews 11:13-16

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 21:1

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3

<sup>9</sup> Acts 20:27, 2 Timothy 4:1-2

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 29

*Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.*  
*Daniel 4:27*

Similarly, the Church should be bold to proclaim the truth of Scripture even when it is contrary to commonly accepted political ideologies.

In all of this Daniel never placed his hope in politics or government despite his high position. Later, in the Medo-Persian administration of which Darius was king,<sup>11</sup> Daniel received much favor in the eyes of the king. Darius decided to promote Daniel “over the whole kingdom” (Dan. 6:3). In jealousy, Daniel’s peers decided to conspire to find fault in him. After finding none, they asked the king to decree “that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions” (Dan. 6:7). Once Daniel heard that the petition had been signed, Daniel’s true hope was displayed as “he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously” (Dan. 6:10).

In Daniel we have a model that encourages us to speak to clear issues with the authority of God’s Word while trusting God’s sovereign rule over political leaders. We should seek to avoid the temptation to fear man and place our hope in political leaders, rather than placing our hope and trust in God as we wait “for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” (Titus 2:13).

### **Where Politics Should Fall in our Priorities**

For Christians, politics and political involvement should be less important to us than our personal relationship with God, our commitment to our families, our participation in our local church, and our pursuit of the lost. We shouldn’t allow our politics to “override” these priorities. Some Christians might argue that “without political freedom we cannot be faithful to our other priorities, so securing these freedoms should be one of our first priorities.”

However, Christians throughout the centuries have remained faithful to these priorities in the

midst of significant political oppression, without seeking to secure political freedom beforehand. The Bible frequently shows that spiritual freedom from the bondage of sin is far more important than political freedom, and that because of our spiritual freedom, Christians can function, even thrive, in the midst of political oppression.

For example, the disciples initially thought that God’s mission in the world through Christ was the establishment of an earthly Judaic kingdom that would end the oppression of the Roman Empire. After the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples came to understand this was not the case. The Holy Spirit revealed that God was primarily after the transformation of men’s and women’s hearts through the proclamation of the gospel. This is the priority that guided the Early Church and should be the priority of Christians today.

This is not to say that political freedom isn’t something to be fought for. In the United States we enjoy many political freedoms and we have a form of government that allows us to participate in the political process. This is a gift from God that Christians should be grateful for and take advantage of. However, political freedom isn’t necessary in order to remain faithful to our biblical priorities and political freedom or other political issues shouldn’t override these priorities.

### **Is the Gospel Guiding Your Political Views or are Your Political Views Guiding “Your Gospel”?**

Christians should ask themselves, “What shapes my worldview?” Is it the news media? Is it political talk show hosts? Is it the entertainment industry? As Christians the Word of God should shape our worldview. A temptation can be to give our political ideologies emphasis and allow the Bible to support our “already formed” views, rather than allowing biblical convictions to shape our political ideologies. We should be constantly evaluating our political ideologies to ensure we are being faithful to Scripture. If Christians fail to guard their hearts in this manner, the political ideologies and agendas espoused on TV, radio, and the internet can be just as dangerous to our souls as other worldly media. Christians should apply the same cautious attitude toward political

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel 6

media as they do toward other TV shows, movies, and music.

### **Attitude Toward Those with Different Political Views**

Christians can set themselves apart from the culture when they think, speak, and act in a way that is considerate and charitable towards people who disagree with them politically. By doing so, particularly in today's partisan political environment, Christians have an opportunity to demonstrate the transforming effect of the gospel in their lives. This can apply both to relationships in the church and relationships with those outside the church. In the church, Christians should be able to enjoy fellowship with other Christians based on their shared passion for the gospel, regardless of differing political views. That is the power and the beauty of what Christ has done—Christians can love and care for one another because of the cross, even when the world would expect strife and enmity because of differences of opinion. With unbelievers, Christians should likewise not allow political differences to impede their witness. The church should be a welcoming place for people of all political views.

However, this doesn't mean that the church is a place where all political views are accepted as equally good or right. Christians do have opinions, and the Bible does give guidance and instruction regarding many current political issues. Christians may state their political opinions, and attempt to convince others to agree with them, without violating biblical principles if they do so charitably and with understanding. A Christian's heart towards politics can be revealed by the manner in which he or she communicates to others about his or her political views. A Christian who becomes angry while discussing healthcare or taxes with a co-worker needs a heart-check. Anger can reveal idolatry; perhaps a craving to "be right," an idol of a particular political viewpoint, or an idol of a particular candidate.

### **Attitude Toward Leaders of our Country**

We are commanded by God to respect those who are in authority over us and to pray for them, because God, in his sovereignty, has placed these "rulers" in our lives. Regardless of our personal opinions and disagreements with our leaders, we

should be respectful towards them, and pray for them.<sup>12</sup> We should take great encouragement to know that, no matter how powerful, dangerous, or influential a politician may seem, we can be confident that God is in control, working all things out for our ultimate good.

In our culture, however, respect for authority figures may be at an all-time low. Thus, this is an area where Christians can, by their counter-cultural actions, be more like Christ and clearly show the light of Christ to a dying world.

However, the concept of respecting and praying for leaders (even those we disagree with) does not mean that we must pray: "May [insert politician] be blessed in all that he does." Rather, our prayers can be directed towards changing the hearts of our leaders when they are in conflict with the Bible. It is also appropriate to confront our leaders, where appropriate, on clear moral issues where their policies are ignoring the truth of God's Word. After the 36th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, John Piper delivered an appeal to the President regarding abortion which exemplifies all of the above principles.<sup>13</sup>

### **Specific Issues**

Applying these biblical principles to specific issues is the most difficult task for those who wish to live out biblical convictions in the modern context. Most of these issues are much more complex than can be addressed in just a few paragraphs. What follows is intended to help the members of our church, as they vote and think about current issues, to distinguish between clear, non-negotiable principles from Scripture, and what can be left to Christian liberty.

Christians should cultivate a fear of the Lord as they develop their political positions. Though some issues have more broad sweeping consequences than others, each argument, vote, and policy is played out before Him to whom we will all one day give an account<sup>14</sup>. Each of us will be called on to answer for how we applied God's Word and exercised the gift of participating in the political process.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Timothy 2:1-2

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O68MByaMVdM>

<sup>14</sup> Romans 14:12, Hebrews 4:13

## Abortion

Scripture is clear that life begins in the womb<sup>15</sup>. The Bible knows no other possible outcome of a fertilized human egg than a human life, with a soul, and a unique, God-given personality. All Christians should agree on this and desire an end to abortion. All Christians should long for the day that every person, group and institution protects the lives of unborn children.

However, Christians may legitimately disagree on the most effective way to end abortion in our country. The exact methods that Christians employ to bring an end to abortion should be left to Christian liberty, as long as they do not replace the gospel as that which is of first importance, and are in accordance with the law.

## Homosexuality

Scripture is clear that homosexuality, in all its forms, is sin. It is contrary to God's design for sex and marriage<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, it is very clear in Scripture that God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman for life.

Sadly, many churches today ignore Scripture by embracing homosexuality and allow practicing homosexuals to be church members. Equally sad, many bible-believing churches and individual Christians have done great harm to the mission of the Church by the *way* they have approached this issue. Much of the rhetoric used by Christian groups is flavored with hate, fear or mockery. Many Christians portray the following attitudes toward the homosexual community: 1) your sin is worse than ours 2) you are not welcome in our homes or churches, no matter what, or 3) you are beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

The duty of the Christian and the Church toward the homosexual community is first love: the same love we extend to all people caught in the deceitfulness of their sin, in which we all once walked<sup>17</sup>. Second, humble, clear, faithful gospel proclamation: again, the same humble, clear, faithful proclamation we offer to all. Third, we should be willing to come alongside those caught in this sin, and the culture that accompanies it, to

lead them to see the Glory of God in Christ and to walk out of this lifestyle. Fourth, we should build churches filled with wonderful examples of marriages that put on full display the joy and wisdom of God's design for marriage and sexuality.

All Christians should desire for the culture around them to honor marriage as God has defined it. However, Christians may legitimately disagree on the most effective way to bring this about in our country. As with abortion, the exact methods that individual Christians employ to defend the biblical vision of marriage should be left to Christian liberty, as long as they do not replace the gospel as that which is of first importance, and are in accordance with the law.

## Political Parties

Christians should beware of wholesale, unwavering allegiance to any political party. While it is not wrong to join, support or even run for office under a particular political party, we are wise to recognize the danger of any allegiance that might compete with our allegiance to Christ. Over time, the political party or candidates that adopt the values of or caters to Christians is bound to change. For this reason, the church would be wise not to endorse a single party or candidate.

It is true that for specific issues, the worldview of the church may be more in line with a particular party's position on an issue. This should never be equated with endorsement of the party as a whole or as a reason for individual Christians to be ostracized for supporting another party.

Most Christians choose a political party or candidate based on specific issues that matter most to them. However, once we identify ourselves with a particular party or candidate, we can be tempted to adopt all the other views and attitudes of that party, sometimes contrary to biblical principles. The Bible must always be our foundation for our views, and the grace of God in the gospel should always flavor our attitudes as we engage in the political process and as we discuss or debate issues with those around us.

The church must be a place where labels such as Republican or Democrat or Libertarian take a back seat to brother and sister in Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Psalm 139:13, Luke 1:44

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 1, Ephesians 5, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1, 1 Timothy 1:10

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 2:1-3

*Fellowship in the church must be centered around the gospel of Christ, not party politics.*

## **Taxes**

We are commanded by Christ himself<sup>18</sup> and by Paul<sup>19</sup> to pay the taxes required of us by our government.

The Bible doesn't prescribe a specific tax policy. The Bible does, however, have a lot to say about our attitudes toward money. Christians should search their hearts to understand what underlies their attitude toward taxes.

Many Christians have very strong opinions about taxes and how tax revenue is used. Sometimes, however, at the heart of these strong opinions is an inordinate love for money, a grasping for security in the amount of money we are able to make or save, or a feeling of entitlement to get something for nothing (or nearly nothing).

There are some legitimate moral questions to consider regarding taxes. For example:

Question: "What if the government uses tax revenue to finance evil like an unjust war, abortion or the destruction of human embryos for research?"

Answer: We must not forget the context in which Jesus and Paul spoke. They are speaking to people living under the rule of the pagan Roman Empire that crucified Christ and murdered Apostles. There is no doubt that tax revenue taken from Christians was used for evil. Jesus and Paul make no caveat regarding the end use of taxes. We are simply commanded to pay what is required.

That being said, Christians should still feel the freedom to vote for candidates, express their views in charitable and legal ways, and promote the tax policy they think is the best use of the finances over which God has made our government stewards.

## **Health Care**

Christ, in his earthly ministry, showed compassion to many people by healing diseases and delivering people from debilitating disorders and demonic oppression<sup>20</sup>. Though these healings were signs verifying Christ as Messiah, they also revealed Christ's care for the physical needs of people.

Likewise, Christians should care for the physical needs of those around them. Certainly, Paul included this in his encouragement that we look not only to our own interests, "but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). Looking to the physical needs of others, especially the poor, was part of Paul's mission as described in Romans 15:26 and Galatians 2:10. This concern for the physical needs of the poor and weak is certainly included in James' description of pure religion in James 1:27.

It is good for Christians to desire that every citizen of the United States be healthy and have access to medical care. However, Christians can legitimately disagree on the best way to ensure people receive this care: whether it is from the government, obtained individually in the free market, or through another means.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our greatest concern is that the gospel of Jesus Christ and a passion for the Kingdom of God would get pushed to the periphery of the lives of our members and the life of our church by an inordinate zeal for politics. We hope that the members of our church would be able to disagree over matters of secondary importance without hindering fellowship over that which is of first importance. We seek to be a place where every word of God's Word is boldly proclaimed without compromise. We want our members to be informed biblically, and to engage the world around them with truth and grace. We want our members to think hard and deep about the issues, and even to take action. But above all, we hope that our congregation will always be a place where the gospel of Jesus Christ shines brightly in the middle of a dark and fallen world; that its transforming effects would be seen in the love,

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17, Luke 20:19-26

<sup>19</sup> Romans 13:1-7

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 8-9, 14-15, 17 and 20, and parallel accounts in Mark, Luke and John

joy, thoughtfulness, humility, and sacrifice of our members; and that the lost would be drawn to the risen Christ who is powerfully at work in our midst; all for the Glory of God!

**Application questions:**

Do you find yourself demonizing other people that disagree with your political views?

Do you get more “fired up” over political issues than you do the gospel of Jesus Christ?

What would the people that know you best say you are most passionate about? What about in an election year?

What reinforces your hope for the future more: biblical truth or the possibility of a particular party or candidate winning an election?

Are you prone towards fear or anxiety during a political season?

Are there areas where your politics have trumped biblical priorities or convictions?

What flavors your discussions and debates over politics?

When was the last time you prayed for your leaders? What about for the leaders you disagree with or don't really like?

Do you feel the freedom to disagree over issues that aren't clearly spelled out in the Bible?

