



GLENDALE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH



CHRISTIANS &
GOVERNMENT

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I. Introduction

Government and Politics are a huge part of American life. It is prudent for any Christian to think through the Biblical teaching on government in order to decide how they ought to respond to the governing authorities. Historically, Christians have taken many different approaches. Some believe that government should compel religion. Others believe that the two institutions have nothing to do with each other and should be kept separate. Some see government as a necessary evil and believe that while it is a necessary institution it should be avoided by Christians.

This set of notes and the accompanying seminar aims to look at several different historical approaches to the Christians relationship to Government and then examine the Biblical passages on government in order to better understand the question, “Should Christians be involved in Government and if so... How?”

II. Historical Positions on the Relationship between Christians and Government

1) GOVERNMENT SHOULD COMPEL RELIGION

- Civil government should compel people to support or follow one particular religion
- This position flows naturally from a deep conviction that one religion is exclusively true, and so society would be best served if the civil government instituted laws consistent with the religion’s teachings and compelled adherence to them
- This view has been held by Christians in previous centuries and has led to many “wars of religion” (especially between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries)
- BUT, over the course of time, Christians have realized that this view is inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus and the nature of faith:
 - Jesus differentiated between the two spheres of “God” and “Caesar” (Matt 22:18), implying that the governmental sphere should lie outside church control
 - Jesus’ statement that His kingdom was “not of this world” (John 18:36) implies that the kingdom should not use the means of this world to establish itself
 - Genuine faith cannot be forced, it must be voluntary; that’s why Jesus and the apostles reasoned and appealed to people, never compelled
- In Christian circles today, this view is only found in a small, fringe movement called Christian Reconstructionism (aka. Theonomy or Dominion Theology), which advocates government acceptance and enforcement of Old Testament laws
- Other religions, notably Islam, still actively promote government enforcement of their religion, and those who fail to comply can face severe penalties

2) GOVERNMENT SHOULD EXCLUDE RELIGION

- Religious beliefs should never be mentioned in governmental functions or on government property and should never play a role in the decision-making process in politics or government
 - BUT, for people of faith, who accept a worldview which acknowledges God at the center of ultimate reality, one's beliefs cannot be "switched off"
- This position flows naturally from a commitment to secularism and, often, a belief that "religion" is harmful or that it is irrelevant
- This view is increasingly becoming the norm in the United States today, as organizations like the ACLU, Freedom from Religion Foundation, etc. seek to eliminate all public references to religion—often seeming specifically to target Judeo-Christian religion—on the basis that they violate the "establishment" clause of the First Amendment of the US Constitution ("*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*")
 - BUT, such an approach often fails to adequately differentiate the **reasons** for a law/policy from the **content** of the law/policy—for instance, all major religions have teachings against stealing and these religious reasons stand behind the laws prohibiting stealing, but laws against stealing do not thereby "establish" any of these religions
 - BUT, such an approach restricts "the free exercise" of religion by prohibiting people from a variety of faith backgrounds from exercising their religious freedom
 - BUT, the "establishment" clause was originally only intended to prevent government sponsorship of one particular religion or denomination
 - BUT, such an approach has never been adopted by the American people through any democratic process, but rather has been imposed by courts

3) ALL GOVERNMENT IS EVIL AND DEMONIC

- The realm of government power is the realm of Satan and his forces, and therefore all governmental use of "power over" someone is a "worldly" exercise of power and is not the way of life that Jesus taught
 - BUT, such a belief leads to a "moral equivalence" between evil and aggressive governmental power and governments who act in self-defense or the defense of others from such aggressive governments (e.g. Hitler, Islamic terrorists, etc.)
- Those who hold this view often favor an absolute pacifism
 - BUT, such absolute pacifism can lead to a failure to fulfill the responsibility to **love a neighbor** who is being unjustly assaulted (Matt 22:39) or to allow for government to be an agent of God's justice (e.g. Rom 13:1-6, where it bears the power of capital punishment)

- This view of government is based on Luke 4:6 “[the devil] said to [Jesus], ‘To you I will give all this authority [of all the kingdoms of the world] and their glory, **for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.**’”
 - BUT, it is not at all clear that the “father of lies” (John 8:44) is being completely truthful about the nature of his authority over all the kingdoms of the world
 - BUT, we will see that Paul (in Rom 13:1-6) and Peter (in 1 Pet 2:13-14) are far more positive about the role of civil government, which is “God’s servant for your good” and “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” and as “sent by [God] to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good”

4) DO EVANGELISM, NOT POLITICS

- Christians should just preach the gospel; that’s what Jesus called us to do
- “It is all right occasionally to support legitimate measures designed to correct a glaring social or political wrong.... A certain amount of healthy and balanced concern about current trends in government and the community is acceptable, as long as we realize that such interest is not vital to our spiritual lives, our righteous testimony or the advancement of the kingdom of Christ.” John MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You: An Alternative to Political Activism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000).
- BUT, the “whole gospel” involves “teaching [disciples] to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19), and so it will result in changed lives. Changed lives make a difference in every sphere of activity in which they find themselves—family, work, neighborhood, and even government.
- BUT, Paul did urge for prayers “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:2), suggesting at least some concern and involvement in the affairs of civil government
- BUT, if the civil government is “instituted by God” and its “God’s servant for [our] good” in its restraint of evil (Rom 13:1-4), it would be wise for Christians to be involved in the creation of laws that restrain evil performed by those who have not accepted the gospel (e.g. laws against drunk driving)
- BUT, historically, Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374); outlawing the brutal battles-to-the-death in which thousands of gladiators had died (in 404); outlawing the cruel punishment of branding the faces of criminals (in 315); instituting prison reforms such as the segregating of male and female prisoners (by 361); stopping the practice of human sacrifice among the Irish, the Prussians, and the Lithuanians as well as among other nations; outlawing pedophilia; granting of property rights and other protections to women; banning polygamy (which is still practiced in some Muslim nations today); prohibiting the burning alive of widows in

India (in 1829); outlawing the painful and crippling practice of binding young women's feet in China (in 1912); persuading government officials to begin a system of public schools in Germany (in the sixteenth century); advancing the idea of compulsory education of all children in a number of European countries; and opposing and often abolishing slavery in most of Europe and in the United States (where 2/3 of the American abolitionists in the mid-1830s were Christian clergymen). Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004).

5) DO POLITICS, NOT EVANGELISM

- Christians should just try to change the laws and the culture and should not emphasize evangelism
- This was a primary emphasis of the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its campaigns to get the church to work aggressively to overcome poverty, slums, crime, racial discrimination, and other social evils.
- BUT, the Social Gospel replaced the need for individuals to place personal trust in Christ with the idea that “salvation” would be accomplished in this life through changing the unjust structures of society. It was accepted primarily among liberal Protestants. Because the movement denied the essence of the gospel, evangelical Protestants distanced themselves from it—often with the result that they also withdrew from the legitimate social action that followed from a genuine faith in Christ.

6) SIGNIFICANT CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT

- Christians should seek to influence civil government according to God's moral standards and God's purposes for government as revealed in the Bible (when rightly understood), but must simultaneously insist on protecting freedom of religion for all citizens
- Involves winsome, kind, thoughtful, loving, persuasive interaction—not angry, belligerent, intolerant, judgmental, red-faced, and hate-filled—that is suitable to each circumstance and that always protects the other person's right to disagree, but that is also uncompromising about the truthfulness and moral goodness of the teachings of God's Word.
- Biblical examples of this model include **Joseph** (Gen 41:37-45 42:6; 45:8-9, 26), **Moses** (Exod 8:1), **Nehemiah** (Neh 1:11), **Mordecai** (Est 9:4; 10:3), **Esther** (Est 5:1-8; 7:1-6; 8:3-13; 9:12-15, 29-32), **Jeremiah** (Jer 29:7 “*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*”), **Daniel** (Dan 4:27), **John the Baptist** (Luke 3:18-20), **Paul** (Acts 24:24-25)

- Without Christian influence, civil government does not have reliable sources for discovering any transcendent source of ethics

III. Biblical Teaching on Government

- **Genesis 9:5-6** *And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*
 - Context: after the Flood, at the beginning of the reestablishment of human society after God destroyed all but Noah's family → so there is nothing limiting this to the Old Testament only or to the nation of Israel only (since the nation had not yet been established); these principles have relevance for the whole human race for all time.
 - **God requires a reckoning for the crime of murder** ("I will require a reckoning for the life of man"): God established the obligation that the crime of murder would be repaid by the taking of the murderer's life ("Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed")
 - **God delegates the responsibility to carry out the punishment to other human beings** ("From his fellow man I will require a reckoning").
 - Once this principle is established, then the imposition of lesser penalties for lesser crimes is also validated, since if an authority has the right to carry out the most severe kind of punishment, then it certainly has the right to carry out lesser punishments for lesser crimes as well
- **Deuteronomy 30:19** *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.*
 - **Freedom of individual choice** is viewed favorably again and again in Scripture (cf. Josh 24:15, Matt 11:28, Rev 22:17)
- **Judges 18-21; 21:25** *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*
 - Context: in a situation of **anarchy**—lawlessness—the lack of government ("there was no king in Israel") **led to some of the most horrible sins recorded in Scripture**
 - A similar situation was probably envisaged in Gen 6:1-7, 11-12

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- **1 Samuel 12:1-4** *And Samuel said to all Israel, "Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me and have made a king over you. 2 And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and gray; and behold, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my youth until this day. 3 Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you." 4 They said, "You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man's hand."*
 - Civil rulers should serve the people and seek the good of the people; they should **not abuse their position for their own gain**
 - Samuel later warned the people that **a king would abuse his power and take from the people for his benefit** (1 Sam 8:11-17)
 - However, a new king of Israel was supposed to **write a copy of the Mosaic law for himself**, to be sure that he would read it and live by it (Deut 17:18-20)
- **Psalm 82:2-4** *"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah 3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*
 - Rulers must judge with fairness and righteousness, and **not "show partiality"** but judge only according to the law and the facts in the case. Accepting bribes to pervert justice was repeatedly condemned (e.g. Deut 16:19; Ps 26:10; Prov 15:27; 17:23; Isa 33:15; Ezek 22:12; Amos 5:12; Hab 1:2-4)
 - Rulers must pay **special attention to defending "the weak and the fatherless"** and by implication others who have little power to defend themselves
 - Rulers are to **use their power to stop "the wicked"** from harming others, particularly those who are "weak" and "needy"
- **Ecclesiastes 8:11** *Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*
 - **Punishment should be executed swiftly**, to serve as a **deterrent to crime**
- **Prophecies to pagan nations** (Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Amos 1-2; Obadiah [written to Edom]; Jonah [sent to Nineveh]; Nahum [written to Nineveh]; Hab 2; Zeph 2)
 - **God holds unbelieving nations accountable for their actions**

- **Daniel 4:17** *The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that **the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.***
 - **God appoints the authorities** who hold governmental power
 - This is consistent with Jesus' statement to Pilate "*You would have no authority over me at all **unless it had been given you from above.** Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*" (John 19:11)

- **Matthew 22:15-22** *Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. 16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 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.**" 22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.*
 - Context: the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus; to say "yes" to Roman taxes ran the risk of appearing to support the hated Roman government. To say "no" to Roman taxes would make Jesus sound like a dangerous revolutionary against Rome's power.
 - Jesus shows that there are two different spheres of influence on the people of God: the civil government which is in power ("Caesar"), and the religious life ("God")
 - Jesus seems to imply that **some things belong to the civil government** ("*the things that are Caesar's*"), and so the church ought not try to control these things (e.g. taxes?)
 - Jesus also implies that **some things belong to people's religious life** ("*the things that are God's*"), and so the civil government ought not try to control these things (e.g. preaching the gospel)

- **Romans 13:1-7** *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is **no authority except from God**, and those that exist have been **instituted by God.** 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for **he is God's servant for your good.** But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not **bear the sword in vain.** For he is the servant of God, an **avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.** 5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For*

because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

- **God has appointed** the authorities who have governmental power (vv. 1–2). This is supported by Jesus’ statement to Pilate, “*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*” (John 19:11)
 - Civil rulers **restrain evil by the threat of punishment for wrongdoing** (v. 3)--
 - Civil rulers **encourage and reward good conduct** (v. 3)
 - Government officials are God’s **servants** or **ministers** when they **approve what is good** and **punish evil** (vv. 3, 4, 6). This is probably speaking about the institution of civil governments, rather than any specific government (which can, like the government in power when Paul wrote these words, do evil). It seems that the function of carrying out this work is what is called “good” (v. 4)
 - Governmental authorities **execute God’s wrath on wrongdoers (v. 4), carrying out the task of retribution**. The mention of the “sword” indicates that the punishment may include **capital punishment**, though most interpreters believe that this passage assumes that the punishment would be appropriate to the crime committed
 - **Christian citizens should be subject to the government and obey the laws of the government** (vv. 1-2)
- **1 Peter 2:13-14** *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.*
 - Civil rulers **restrain evil by the threat of punishment for wrongdoing** (v. 14)
 - Civil rulers **encourage and reward good conduct** (v. 14)
 - **Christian citizens should be subject to the government and obey the laws of the government** (vv. 1-2)
 - **Acts 4:18-20** *So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."*
 - **Acts 5:27-29** *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."*

- When the civil government makes a demand which requires Christians to disobey God, Christians must act in disobedience to the civil government—accepting the consequences
- Giving this priority to God—in spite of the consequences—is also evidenced in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to worship the golden image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:13-27): “[O]ur God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 **But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.**” (Dan 3:17-18)
- This attitude is also reflected in the refusal of the **Egyptian midwives** to put newborn Hebrew boys to death (Exod 1:17, 21), **Daniel’s** refusal to obey a law that prohibited prayer to God (Dan 6:10), and the disobedience of the **wise men** to return to Herod and tell him where Jesus was to be found (Matt 2:8, 12)
- Finally, this attitude is consistent with the NT emphasis that “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (Phil 3:20), and that Christians are “*sojourners and exiles*” (1 Pet 2:11) in this world—including among the civil governments of this world
- **1 Timothy 2:1-2** *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.*
 - Christians are urged to **pray for the civil rulers**, probably in connection with the civil government’s function of restraining evil and rewarding good conduct

IV. Closing Thoughts

- **What about the OT laws?**
 - These laws belong to what is called the “Mosaic covenant” because God gave the laws to Moses and Moses gave them to the people
 - Israel was to be for God “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6), which was to be a “theocracy” (ruled by God Himself). Thus, the **laws of Israel governed both religious life and well as the civil government**
 - Since there is a distinction between the Church and the nation of Israel, the law code of Israel would be inappropriate for the church
- **Does Scripture endorse any type of civil government?**
 - The most common form of government reflected in the pages of Scripture was hereditary monarchy, but this type of government is not endorsed or commanded (except in connection with the Messiah)
 - The **equality of all people** as created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) offers some support for a kind of democracy

- If government is instituted to **serve for the good of the people** themselves, this offers some support for a kind of democracy
- Because of the **presence of sin** in every human heart (e.g. Rom 3:9-18), and because of the **corrupting influence of power**, some system of **divided power**, so that one person or group provides “checks” on the use of power by other people or groups, is most prudent for civil government
 - Jesus did not appoint one apostle with authority over the church, but, rather, **12 apostles** (See Matt 10:1-4; Acts 1:15-26)
 - Every indication of the form of government that was followed by local churches in the New Testament shows that they were not governed by a single elder but by **plural elders** (see Tit 1:5; Jam 5:14)

Bibliography

- Boyd, Gregory A. *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005. As the title suggests, Boyd views all Christian attempts to employ political power to be contrary to the politics of Jesus. Boyd also argues for a strict pacifist position.
- Colson, Charles. *God and Government: An Insider's View on the Boundaries between Faith & Politics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007. In my opinion, the most helpful book in this bibliography for obtaining a comprehensive Christian worldview and seeing how that worldview conflicts with the current direction of the United States. Colson was a political insider under President Nixon who was arrested in the Watergate scandal and experienced a genuine conversion to Christianity in prison. Most of his work has been in prison ministry, but his experience as a government insider has given him some unique insight into the relationship between the church and civil government.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010. Offers the most helpful theological framework for understanding government and involvement in politics. In all the specific areas he investigates, he usually lands on traditional conservative Republican positions.
- Olson, Roger E. *How to be Evangelical without being Conservative*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008. Only a couple of chapters directly relate to Christians and government, but Olson offers one of the most helpful paradigms for thinking about what it means to be “evangelical” (i.e. a genuine follower of Jesus) without being “conservative” (by which he means the negative connotation of “conservative” which is perceived as “*that habit of the heart that reacts against anything nontraditional and tends toward an idolatry of some perceived past “golden age” when church and society were good and not yet corrupted by forces of secularity and liberal thinking*”). Instead of being “conservative” (in this negative sense), he attempts to chart a more consistent biblical approach in a variety of spheres. I found myself to be largely in agreement with most—not all—of his conclusions.

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Wallis, Jim. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it*. New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005. In contrast to the title, which suggests a balanced critique against both the “Right” (Republican) and “Left” (Democratic) ends of the political spectrum, Wallis presents a case for supporting “Left” (Democratic)-leaning political goals on the part of Christians: fighting terrorism primarily through international sanctions and dialogue instead of military action, robust governmental programs to alleviate poverty, abolition of capital punishment, reconciliation with regard to race, and respect for the civil rights of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people (though taking no official position on gay marriage). I was personally challenged by his chapters on alleviating poverty in connection with a considerable amount of Scripture—especially the OT prophets—which speaks out against the rich oppressing the poor.