

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICS AND ACTIVISM?

Introduction:

- This topic is very appropriate considering the current political state of our country. We have just come out of an election year that was full of controversy and extremely high tensions. As we watched the political tensions rise the last couple of years, we began to see much of the evangelical church eagerly jump on the political bandwagon.
- Pulpits were resounding with accolades for one or the other candidate and for approval or disdain for certain issues or platforms. We heard plenty of unhelpful rederick from both sides. Some even suggested that if you do not vote, you are committing a serious sin.
- Because we are Christians, we need to come at these issues from a Biblical worldview. Statements like those just mentioned have the potential to be extremely divisive due to the highly politically polarized state of our country. Because of these realities we need to step back as followers of Jesus Christ and ask the hard questions.
- Should we as Christians be involved in politics at all? If so, to what extent and in what venue? How should we respond to political activism and is there a place for the Christian to participate in this? If so, to what extent and what should be the purpose of that activism? These are the issues we want to wrestle with this evening. To begin with Let's take a look at the history of Christianity and politics.

I. The History of Christians in Politics.

- The question of how much a Christian should be involved in politics is not new to Christianity. As Christianity became more of a mainstream religion, the potential it had to influence government became more and more of a reality. When we really begin to see this become prevalent is in the 4th Century A.D.

1. Fourth Century to the Reformation.

(a) Constantine (*Flavius Valerius Constantinus*)

- Emperor from 306 – 337. After winning a civil war he became the sole ruler of the roman Empire in 324. After spending much of his life as a pagan. The story of Constantine's conversion is as such.
- Eusebius of Cesarea, a Roman historian stated that Constantine was extremely concerned about a battle that was about to take place during this civil war. The battle was with his rival Maxentius. Just before the battle it is said that Constantine saw a vision of a cross in the sky.¹

¹ <http://www.classichistory.net/archives/constantine-christianity>

- Not fully understanding the vision, it is said that Constantine prayed for an explanation and had a dream of a symbol which was the combination of the Greek letter's chi and rho, the first two letters of Christ.
- Constantine then explains this heavenly dream to his army and tells them to make the battle standard that is described to them and to place the symbol of the Highest God on their shields.²
- You guessed it, Constantine's army wins the battle and Constantine determines to worship only Christ. At this point Constantine immerses himself into his faith.
- Constantine issues the Edict of Millan which effectively ends the persecution of Christians within the roman Empire. However, it does not become the official religion of the Empire until 380.
- On February 27, 380, the Roman Emperor Theodosius signed a decree that made Christianity the religion of the state and punished the practice of pagan rituals.³ The church, which had lived a lonely existence on the "outside" up to this time, now enjoyed an unexpected imperial embrace.
- As a result, from this point on, the distinction between appropriate ecclesiastical demeanor and worldly pretensions to pomp and power were increasingly lost. In the Middle Ages, the distinction disappeared entirely.⁴
- This amalgamation of state and church continued in Rome up until 1054. At this time there was a series of disputes, between the eastern and western churches regarding the authority of the Pope. Thus, the Great Schism took place.
- The Eastern Orthodox Church began to go its own way, separated from Roman jurisdiction, and this remains a breach that has been mostly unhealed. In the western Empire, this church, state merger continued on into the 16th Century as the Reformation took hold.⁵



² <http://www.classichistory.net/archives/constantine-christianity>

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/christianity-becomes-the-religion-of-the-roman-empire-february-27-380/a-4602728>

⁴ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/rise-papacy/>

⁵ Ibid.

2. The Sixteenth Century.

(a) Henry VIII

- King of England from 1509 – 1547. Head of the Church of England from 1532 until his death. Henry wanted a divorce from Catherine of Aragon but Pope Clement VII refused to give it to him. Largely because the papacy was under the control of Charles V of Spain who was the nephew of Catherine. Therefore, Henry broke with Rome and started the Church of England.⁶
- Henry and every ruler after him would now be the head of the church. They claimed divine right for their positions as head of church and state. Although Henry was never truly protestant (he was in name only) Men like Thomas Cranmer the first Archbishop of Canterbury were. These men tried to effect change in the government and made some great progress until Mary came to power 1553-1558.⁷



3. The Seventeenth Century.

- Since the church and state had been so intimately connected for many years, by the 17th century there were few who believed that a church unconnected with the civil power was possible in a unified state.
- Common religious standards were looked upon as a principal support of the political order. When the notions of diversity of belief and toleration of dissent did start to grow, they were not generally seen to conflict with the concept of a state church.
- The Puritans, for example, who fled religious persecution in England in the 17th century, enforced conformity to church ideas among settlers in the American colonies.⁸
- The concept of secular government, as expressed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, reflected secularisms influence on colonial intellectuals and the special interests of the established churches in preserving their separate and distinct identities.
- The Baptists, notably, held the separation of church and state powers as a principle of their creed.⁹

⁶ Nick Needham, 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Volume 2. (Christian Focus Publication, 2016)

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/church-and-state>

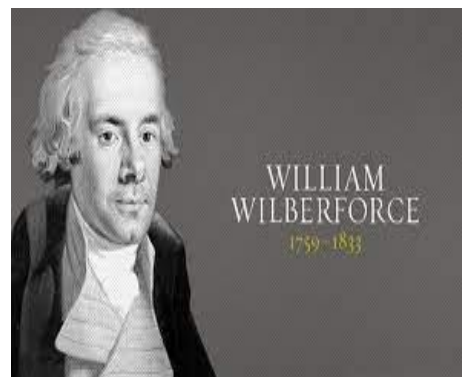
⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

4. The Eighteenth Century.

(a) William Wilberforce

- Member of Parliament from 1780-1859. Wilberforce was a Christian and had a huge impact on the slave trade. Eventually on March 8, 1807 the Slave Trade Act was passed effectively ending the slave trade for the English.
- The 18th Century also saw the age of reason or the Enlightenment which looked poorly upon Christianity. Due to this the influence of Christianity on government (for better or for worse) became less and less. The philosophies of men like Immanuel Kant, John Locke and David Hume won the day.
- However, the Great Awakening also took place in America. Thousands of people were coming to Christ through the preaching of men like Johnathan Edwards, George Whitfield, and John Wesley. The residual effects of this time cannot be overestimated. The effects echoed well into the 19th and 20th centuries.



5. The Nineteenth Century up to today.

- This century continued in the vein of the 18th century with a separation of church and state. However, there were many Christians who were involved in politics. The Judeo-Christian influence on the Church in America was clearly seen in its leaders and policies. Prayer was regular occurrence and reading from the Bible was not unheard of.
- Two fundamental attitudes had developed in matters related to the separation of church and state. The first, coming from the first amendment of the United States Constitution, was supported by a tendency to leave to the church, set free from state supervision, a maximum freedom in the realization of its spiritual, moral, and educational tasks.
- In the United States, for example, a comprehensive church school and educational system has been created by the churches on the basis of this freedom, and numerous colleges and universities have been founded by churches.¹⁰
- Today, the first amendment is offend referred to by Christians as they express their beliefs both in a religious setting and within the government.
- That was a brief history of Christianity and politics. One thing is clear from Scripture and history: The Church has continued to exist even under highly imperfect governments.

¹⁰ <https://brewminate.com/evangelical-religion-and-evangelical-democracy-in-the-19th-century/>

- So, no matter what we decide here tonight, the bottom line is that we should not tie ourselves too tight to one particular human government. However, with all of that being said, how can we as Christians think rightly about the government and political involvement?

II. A Biblically Look the Christian and Politics.

- To begin with, lets ask the question, what is our commission as followers of Jesus Christ?

1.) What are we called to do?

(a) Make disciples:

- First of all, that we need to understand that Jesus promised to build the church. In **Matthew 16:18** Jesus proclaimed that he would build his church and that the gates of Hades would not overpower it.¹¹
- After this, he gave the church her mission. **Matthew 28:18-20**,¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
- There it is. Based on that, instead of concentrating on political issues and debates, believers should be consumed with the responsibility as Christ’s ambassadors. That is the church’s mandate.¹²
- Jesus makes it abundantly clear that above all, Christians are citizens of Christ’s eternal, spiritual kingdom. Therefore, the primary change we are to be used to bring about is first spiritual, not political.
- **John 18:36-37** ~³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

¹¹ <https://thecripplegate.com/what-the-state-can-do-vs-what-the-church-can-do/>

¹² John MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009)

2.) Why are we called to do it?

(a) That is where heart change happens:

- We are called to make disciples because that is where the real change will take place. No amount of political activism or legislation that dictates morality will ever change the heart of anyone.
- When we allow ourselves to get distracted by politics, we inevitably neglect our responsibility to share and preach the gospel. As we get deeper and deeper into political activism it can begin to blur the lines regarding our mission field.
- Those in an opposing political party, then become the enemies rather than the lost who need Christ preached to them with love and compassion.
- Those who share our political convictions are embraced as “brothers and sisters” even though they may also be lost souls.¹³ Ungodly partnerships can develop when true Christians join hands with cult groups and other unbelievers based on shared political ideologies.
- If you believe that your friends political and moral leanings need to change, don’t talk to him so much about his political leanings. Talk to him about his need for the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of the biblical Jesus.
- You will do far more to further God’s cause by getting to know your liberal neighbors and praying for him than by attempting to engage in a politically charged debate with him.

3.) Where does our confidence lie?

(a) In God we trust:

- We see it on our currency, but often forget what it truly means. Those four powerful words, “In God we trust.” What does that mean for believers when it comes to politics?
- For starters it means that we can trust God for both national and foreign affairs. Friends, no matter who is in the White House, the Congress, or the courtroom, God is on His throne. He is the one whom Paul is referring to in 1 Timothy 6:15-16.
- **1 Timothy 6:15-16 ~ He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.**

¹³ John MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009)

- We see all throughout Scripture that God is sovereign over all the affairs of this world including the governments and military powers.
- **2 Chronicles 20:6** ~ ⁶ and he said, “O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You.
- **Romans 13:2** ~ ² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

4.) What should this confidence elicit?

(a) Hope and Comfort:

- God’s sovereignty does not excuse human sinfulness or irresponsibility. But it should elicit great hope from the Christian. As we see this society growing more and more wicked.
- The sovereignty of God should relieve our anxiety and worry as well as the misguided notion that it is our responsibility to effect political change. The Lord is directing our nation within His providential purposes for His glorious ends. He is doing the same with every other nation on earth¹⁴.
- In-fact, if we look closely at Scripture, we know that things are going to get worse until the return of Christ.
- **2 Thessalonians 2:7-12** ~ ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way. ⁸ Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; ⁹ *that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, ¹⁰ and with ^[d]all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe ^[g]what is false, ¹² in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.
- **1 Timothy 4:1-5** ~ But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ² by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, ³ *men* who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the

¹⁴ John MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009)

truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; ⁵ for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

- Even so, many Christians believe that they can stop this degradation of society by passing legislation. The truth is no society will ever be truly made right until Christ comes and sets up his kingdom.¹⁵
- **Revelation 20:6** ~ ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.
- Until that time, we should not be surprised to see morally conservative political efforts fail. So, instead of engaging in political activism, the Christian will do well to focus on being faithful to what God has called us to do within our personal sphere of influence.¹⁶
- This includes evangelizing the lost as we have already stated **Acts 1:8**; **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**; **1 Peter 3:15**. But it also includes, exalting the Savior **1 Corinthians 10:31**; **Colossians 3:17**, encouraging the saints **Hebrews 3:13**; **10:24-25**, and exhibiting godly conduct **1 Thessalonians 4:11**; **2 Thessalonians 3:12**.

5.) What is our responsibility to Government?

(a) To Submit and pay Taxes:

- Like it or not, we are called as Christians to willingly submit to the governing authorities, and to pay taxes. As we do this, we are following both the command of Scripture and the example of Christ.
- Remember when Jesus walked the earth, the oppressive Roman government was ruling the world. Rome basically did what Rome wanted to do. There was not democratic process.
- Yet in **Matthew 22:21** we hear Jesus telling His followers to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. He did not call for an uprising to bring down the oppressive government.¹⁷
- He did not set up some kind of political administration or organize public protests. He tells us to submit to the government. We see this same exhortation in **Romans 13** and in **1 Peter 2:13-15**. Paul and Peter urge the believer on in the same manner.

¹⁵ John MacArthur, *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <https://thecripplegate.com/what-the-state-can-do-vs-what-the-church-can-do/>

- **Romans 13:1** ~ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.
- **1 Peter 2:13-15** ~ ¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. ¹⁵ For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.
- The only exception to this is if the government orders you to do something that will cause you to sin. We see an example of this in the book of Acts.
- **Acts 5:27-29** ~ ²⁷ When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.
- Taxes are dealt with in **Romans 13:7** ~ ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

6.) Where can a Christian get involved?

(a) Vote: (*run for office*)

- The church is by no means anti-politics. We have been given a wonderful opportunity to be involved in the political process in a non-violent law-abiding manner, we need to take advantage of that. ¹⁸

(b) Sign Petitions:

- This is another non-violent law-abiding way that we can become involved in the political process. Signing a petition is just like voting. You are making your desire known without violating **Romans 13** or **1 Peter 2**.

(c) Pray:

- Looking at Scripture, we see that we are commanded to pray for those in authority over us. Even those whom we consider political opponents are to receive our prayers on their behalf.
- It was during the reign of Nero that Paul told Timothy this. Look at 1 Timothy 2:1-2. **1 Timothy 2:1-2** ~ **2** First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

¹⁸ <https://thecripplegate.com/what-the-state-can-do-vs-what-the-church-can-do/>

- So, Paul prayed for, and urged Timothy to pray for, the very King who would have Paul's head removed from his body. When leaders, at all levels of government, do things we do not like, we need to be praying for them not protesting.
- Pray for their salvation and for wisdom to make decisions that will bring glory to God. Also, remember to keep your behavior excellent among the unbelievers so that they will be drawn to Christ not turned off.
- Do not speak evil of your leaders. You may not agree with them or their policies, but do not speak of them in a way that is sinful. Guard your tongue, think before you speak.
- **James 1:19** ~ ¹⁹This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.
- **James 3:5-7** ~ ...the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. ⁸ But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. ¹¹ Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor *can* salt water produce fresh.

Conclusion:

As we close, just keep in mind that one day Christ will return and when He does, He will establish His kingdom. This will be the perfect government in which He will rule with absolute justice. We are told in Scripture that we will reign with Him as we worship Him in His glory.

Until that day, we need to remember that our primary mission is to preach the gospel and not to instigate political change. We do submit to and pray for the governing authorities God has put in place, but we do so remembering that our true citizenship is in heaven.