

The Gospel and Politics

1 Peter 2:13-17

About three years ago, *Christianity Today* ran an article about whether churches should display the American flag in their sanctuary.¹ For decades this was a normal practice for many church denominations—a mark of one’s commitment to God and country. It is less common today, as people are wary of conflating the cause of Christ with the cause of ‘Merica, and all the more so as we find the aims of God and country increasingly at odds. Russell Moore tells the story of one pastor

who wanted to do away with the flag, but didn’t want to be seen as un-American, so he devised a plan to secret the flag away in the middle of a Saturday night, hoping the congregation just wouldn’t notice the next day. This game of “Rapture the Flag” didn’t work, of course. By dawn’s early light, they saw that the flag was not there. And that’s when the metaphorical bombs started bursting in air.²

It’s a goofy story, but it illustrates an honest question: *what hath the gospel to do with politics?* How should we think about the relationship between church and state?

On the one hand the church is not an American institution. God promised Abraham descendants from *all nations*; Jesus sent his disciples to preach the gospel to *all nations*; and when he returns there will be, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, people “from *every nation*, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9; see also Gen. 17:4; Matt. 28:18-20).

Nor can we honestly say, in my opinion, that America is a Christian nation. While the vision and values upon which this country was founded were certainly influenced by a Judeo-Christian worldview, that doesn’t mean our founding father were all Christians. They simply weren’t. And the kind of revisionist history that attempts to “baptize the dead” and claim unorthodox historical heroes for Team Jesus is frankly embarrassing, and does more harm than good.³ Moreover, there is the simple fact that you cannot claim to have religious freedom *and* be a Christian nation at the same time. We need to be honest about that. The historical influence of Christianity has been good for our country, but the vision has always been one of plurality and religious freedom—our first amendment right.

¹ Douglas Wilson, Lisa Velthouse, and Russell Moore, “Should Churches Display the American Flag in Their Sanctuaries?” *Christianity Today*, July 5, 2012. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/july-august/should-churches-display-the-american-flag.html>.

² Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 138.

³ See, e.g., David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You’ve Always Believed about Thomas Jefferson*, which was so full of historical inaccuracies that publisher Thomas Nelson pulled it from shelves and ceased distribution. See Joe Carter, “Publisher Pulls David Barton’s Revisionist History of Thomas Jefferson,” *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, August 10, 2012. Available at: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/publisher-pulls-david-bartons-revisionist-history-of-thomas-jefferson>.

And yet, as followers of Christ who are also citizens of this nation, we are Christians *and* Americans at the same time. Citizens who enjoy the rights and protections and freedoms afforded by our country, and who bear certain civic obligations in return: jury duty, paying taxes, voting. Some of us make our livelihood in public service, holding office or serving in the military; some of our private sector work largely deals with government contracts. Many of us are “proud to be an American, where at least I know I’m free.” We can sing “God Bless the USA” in our sleep. We love our country; we’ve had family and friends die for our country. And many of us are worried about the direction of our country—the kind of world we’re leaving for our children.

More than that, being a good Christian actually means being a good citizen. Paul tells us in Romans 13:1-2: “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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” As much as we might be tempted to completely disengage from politics and separate ourselves from the world, that option is neither possible nor biblical.

So what does the gospel have to do with politics? How do we navigate the tension between church and state? The good news of Jesus impacts every aspect of life; that’s what we’ve been demonstrating throughout this whole series. So how do we engage politically without resorting to religious coercion on one side (imposing the expressions of our faith on those who don’t share it), or religious compromise on the other (forsaking, or being forced to forsake, our unique message and kingdom commitments for public acceptance and political expedience)?

Once again, the apostle Peter offers us sage wisdom for living as God’s people in a fallen world. We looked at this book a couple weeks ago when we began the conversation about the gospel in the public square—how we are “strangers and exiles,” resident aliens in this world. Our citizenship is in heaven; we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and have an inheritance kept for us in heaven that can never perish, spoil, or fade (cf. 1:3-4, 18). But like immigrants in a foreign land, we reside here on earth. We are waiting for our future home—the new heavens and new earth that God has promised. And until that day, we live here as *strangers and exiles*—not the kind that wall themselves off in a ghetto, or the kind that assimilate so thoroughly that there’s no trace of their unique heritage left. Rather, we are called to what Russell Moore has described as an “engaged alienation”⁴—to interact with our country and our culture in meaningful ways without compromising the gospel. As Peter puts it in ch. 2:12, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

Our passage this morning follows immediately after the one we looked at two weeks ago, and begins to apply this call of “engaged alienation” to the question of citizenship—interaction with our governing authorities on earth. And here we see two principles or guidelines that Peter gives us in navigating church and state, the gospel and politics.

⁴ Moore, 8.

1. Honor the Authority of Human Institutions

First, God calls his people to honor the authority of human institutions. 1 Peter 2:13-14: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” It’s very similar to what Paul says in Romans 13, as we read a few minutes ago. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” And lest we think the apostles were losing it, Jesus says as much when he answers a question about paying taxes: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21).

Why does God require this of his people? It’s easy to picture if the governing authorities you’re submitting to are operating in a generally Christian way. But let’s not forget that the apostles were “not speaking of a political system consistent with ‘traditional values’ . . . [but] of a bloodthirsty and pagan Caesar, a government directly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.”⁵ Why submit to *them*?

God commands his people to submit to the authority of human institutions because those institutions have a role to play in society while we wait for Christ’s return. It’s interesting that one of ancient Israel’s roles was to execute justice on God’s behalf. Israel was what we call a *theocracy*—a nation-state with God at its head. And so when God wanted to pour out his wrath on sin and wickedness, one of the ways he did that was through Israel as his agent of justice. The destruction of pagan nations during conquest of Canaan wasn’t just God giving Israel land, but God punishing the idolatrous nations living there for their wickedness and sin (see Gen. 15:20).

The church does not have that same role, however. When Jesus came as Israel’s king—as True Israel himself—he took up their role as judge. When he returns he will execute that role justly and swiftly. He is coming again, Peter tells us in ch. 4, “to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet. 4:5). But unlike Israel, he does not share that responsibility or role with the church. It’s not our job to execute justice or enforce the rule of law in society; the church is not a political nation-state. Instead, during this meantime, he has given that role to the state, to the kingdoms of this world. To human institutions and governing authorities.

And that’s what the state is supposed to do—to execute justice and enforce the rule of law. The emperor sends governors “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (2:14). Or as Paul describes it in Romans 13:3-6:

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 the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

⁵ Moore, 154.

Paying taxes. Obeying laws. These are not just matters of citizenship; they are matters of *discipleship*. Submitting to our governing authorities is ultimately a matter of submitting to God, who has placed them there for his purposes.

But what happens when the state operates unjustly? What happens when the goals and actions of the state run counter to the vision and moral values of God's kingdom? What happens when the state tries to stop you from obeying God, or force you to disobey God? Is there ever a time when we disobey the state in order to obey God? Should Christians just steer clear of the state—lay low and try to go unnoticed? Should we stand in loud protest? Should we get involved and try to change things from within? This brings us to the second point.

2. Live as Servants of God

God calls us to honor the authority of human institutions. But he calls us to do so *as servants of God*. Look again at *why* Peter tells us to submit in v. 13: “Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution . . .” And again, in v. 16: “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living *as servants of God*.” We don't serve the government as slaves, but freely, as redeemed servants of God. The motivation and basis for submitting to human institutions is our ultimate allegiance to Christ.

Jesus is the King of kings—the king who reigns over all other kingdoms. His is the only kingdom that is perfect, and the only kingdom that will last forever. America will come and go, just like every other nation around us and before us. But there will come a day, as Revelation 11 puts it, when “the kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Every rule and authority under heaven will finally acknowledge his rightful rule, and all nations will submit to him. We owe our supreme allegiance to him, above all other authorities and powers.

So while we are called to genuinely honor human authorities, there is a higher authority and more lasting kingdom to which we belong. And it's this higher and supreme allegiance that actually helps guide us in how to interact with our governing authorities, especially when the kingdoms of this world clash with the kingdom of God.

For instance, it helps the church *guard the distinction between the cause of America and the cause of Christ*. That such a distinction exists should be obvious. But it's entirely too easy, whatever your political leanings, to confuse or even fuse together the cause of America with the cause of Christ. You hear it when politicians lace their speeches with Bible references simply to win points, or when preachers give sermons shaped more by political ideologies than the Bible. You see it when a church talks more about preserving traditional family values or educational reform than preaching the gospel of Jesus. It's not that family values and education don't matter. But our hope is not in intact families and high school diplomas, but a crucified and risen king. A king whose grace is sufficient for every sinner, who offers love and redemption to all people regardless of their education or family status.

When we forget that our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, we let our politics drive the gospel. We put our hope in political action instead of public witness. We baptize our party's platform as though it's a mandate from heaven. We rally around political candidates like Messiah figures.

When politics drive the gospel, as Moore explains, the church ends up “with a public witness in which Mormon talk-show hosts and serially-monogamous casino magnates and prosperity-gospel preachers are welcomed into our ranks, regardless of what violence they do to the gospel. They are, after all, ‘right on the issues.’”⁶

The church must do better than this. The problem is not building alliances with people who don’t share our faith in every detail. We actually need to do better on that too. It’s a good thing for Protestants and Catholics to work together fighting abortion, and for evangelicals and mainline liberals to work together against human trafficking. The problem is when we reduce the Christian faith to a political agenda, and then redefine Christianity according to public policy. The only way someone can say that Fox News is a “prophetic mouthpiece,”⁷ or that Donald Trump is God’s “trumpet,”⁸ or that Planned Parenthood is doing “God’s work,”⁹ is if you replace the gospel of Jesus with some other gospel.

We are called to live first and foremost as servants of God. It’s the gospel that should drive our politics, not the other way around. And when the gospel drives our politics, it’s then that we’re actually most useful to the cities and states and nations we live in. Being good disciples makes us *better citizens*—in several ways.

First, *it keeps central our most important contribution—the good news of Christ*. The greatest thing we have to offer the fallen world around us is not our personal piety or moral standards, but the news that there is God in heaven who not only made this world but loves this world, who is grieved to see it in the condition that it’s in, and who will be faithful to make right what is wrong in the end. More than that—he’s already begun to establish his justice by sending his Son Jesus to be our Savior our King. A Savior who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, who took upon himself everything that’s wrong with this broken world. And most importantly, a Savior who took upon himself *the chief thing* that’s wrong with this world—our sin, our rebellion against God. When he died on the cross he paid for that sin, to cleanse us and forgive us and reconcile us to God. When he rose from the dead, he brought forth new life, a new start—not only for us but for this fallen world. And when he comes again he will establish justice once and for all, bring all wrongs to account and making everything right in his eternal kingdom.

This is the church’s most important contribution to society—the message only the church can bring. As Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert put it, “there is something worse than death and something better than human flourishing. If we hope only for renewed cities and restored bodies

⁶ Moore, 32.

⁷ Os Hillman, “Is God Using Donald Trump to Wake Up the Nation?” *Charisma News*, accessed Oct. 10, 2015. Available at: <http://www.charismanews.com/politics/50889-is-god-using-donald-trump-to-wake-up-the-nation>.

⁸ Jeremiah Johnsen, as cited in Warren Thockmorton, “Donald Trump Shall Become the Trumpet: My Entry for Best Article in the ‘Wait, This Isn’t Parody?’ Category,” *Patheos*, July 29, 2015. Available at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/warrenthockmorton/2015/07/29/donald-trump-shall-become-the-trumpet-my-entry-for-best-article-in-the-wait-this-isnt-parody-category/>. The original post by Johnsen has been removed.

⁹ Jeffrey Walton, “Liberal Clergy Praise Planned Parenthood ‘Doing God’s Work,’” *Christian Post*, July 30, 2015. Available at: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/liberal-clergy-praise-planned-parenthood-doing-gods-work-142117/>.

in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied.”¹⁰ Living as servants of God means keeping the gospel central.

Second, our allegiance to Christ also supplies us with *a moral foundation for doing good in the world*, whether as part of the government, alongside it, or if necessary, in opposition to it.

One of the most repeated commands throughout 1 Peter is the call to “do good,” even when others accuse or oppose us.

- “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your *good deeds* and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (2:12)
- “For this is the will of God, that by *doing good* you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” (2:15)
- “For it is better to suffer for *doing good*, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.” (3:17)
- “Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while *doing good*.” (4:19)

God calls us as strangers and exiles to do good in this world. “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (2:17). When it comes to politics, that begins by *praying* for our governing officials. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:1-2: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” I think few of us can really appreciate the pressures that come with holding a public office. The unrealistic deadlines, the constant scrutiny and opposition, both from within and without. Even if you don’t like the way someone governs, they need your prayers.

This vision of good also moves us to *do something about the problems we see in our world*. The freedom we have in Christ is not something to be exploited for selfish gain, but put to use for others (cf. 2:16). To love our neighbors in tangible ways. To stand up and take action to protect the vulnerable—orphans, widows, unborn children. To speak out against injustice and oppression. And to work hard to find solutions to problems that honor God and do good for people.

It’s easy for the secular world to forget that the foundation for the greatest social reforms in modern history was Christianity. It was William Wilberforce’s Christian faith that moved him to work tirelessly to bring an end to slavery in the U.K., laboring in Parliament for 42 years. When Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she awoke the seared conscience of a nation to the true evils of slavery. The reason she wrote it, she said, is “because as a woman, as a mother, I was broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian, I felt the dishonor to Christianity—because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath.”¹¹ It was Martin Luther King Jr.’s Christian faith that fueled his peaceful and persistent

¹⁰ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 23.

¹¹ “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Life,” Harriet Beecher Stowe Center. Accessed Oct. 10, 2015; available at: <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/hbs/>.

fight against racism and segregation in the U.S. How will we put our Christian faith into action for the better of our communities and our nation? Being a good disciple makes us a better citizen.

Finally, remembering that we are servants of God first, and secondarily citizens of the state, *frees us to suffer for the cause of Christ*. The time coming, and is already here, when the good we seek to do for the state will not be seen as good, but will be slandered as evil instead. Peter talks about it throughout his letter. We see it today on an increasing scale. A recent *New York Times* editorial suggested that religious liberty should no longer be protected if gay rights are on the line: “Church leaders must be *made* ‘to take homosexuality off the sin list.’”¹² Not encouraged, but coerced. From the contraception mandate of Obamacare, to the penalization of florists and bakers whose conscience restricts them from condoning a gay wedding ceremony, this is perhaps the first time in American history where the laws of our land actually attempt to *force* us to disobey God.

So what do we do? Is there a limit to our obedience to human institutions?

The answer is yes. Daniel refused to bow in idolatry when the royal edict demanded it on pain of death. The Hebrew midwives refused Pharaoh’s instructions to murder the babies, and God rewarded them for it. When James and Peter were told by the Sanhedrin to stop talking about Jesus, they replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

What do we do if or when we find ourselves on the wrong side of political power? First, we keep doing good. Loving our neighbors, praying for those who persecute us. Because not only are we following a pattern that Christ left us, identifying with his suffering (2:20-25), we will be vindicated in the end. Again, 2:15: “For this is the will of God, that by *doing good* you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Second, we should exercise whatever political rights we have. We are fortunate enough to live in a country where we have a voice. We can lobby. We can petition. We can vote. We can run for office. Write opinions. Be politically engaged. We shouldn’t shy away from these rights—not only when our religious liberty is at stake, but when the wellbeing of others is on the line. Christians cannot remain politically silent about abortion, racism, gun violence, drug addiction, human trafficking. We should exercise our political rights as servants of God.

But the common thread in each biblical example of civil disobedience is a willingness to face the consequences for obeying God over man. This too, quite ironically, is honoring the authority of human institution. A willingness to receive their unjust verdict if that’s what it comes to. To suffer for doing good, just like Jesus.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:21-24)

¹² Frank Bruni, “Bigotry, the Bible and the Lessons of Indiana,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2015. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/frankbrunisamesexsinners.html?_r=0. Emphasis mine.

Russell Moore encourages us:

We should protect our legacy of a free church in a free state. We ought to pray and work for a ‘quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty’ (1 Tim. 2:2). But that is not the ultimate sign of our success. It is better for our future generations to be willing to go to jail, for the right reasons, than to exchange the gospel of the kingdom for a mess of Esau’s pottage. Sometimes jails filled with hymn-singing, letter-writing, gospel-preaching Christians can do extraordinary things.¹³

We may not fly the stars and stripes in our sanctuary—and I don’t suggest we do. The church is not a national institution, but a global and a heavenly one. But the gospel bids us to honor the authority of human institutions, for the sake of the Lord, as servants and representatives of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. Politics is often an emotionally-charged subject. Why do you think this is?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. Read 1 Peter 2:9-12, the section just before our passage. What is Peter talking about here, and how does it prepare us for the message of our passage (vv. 13-17)?
3. As Peter applies 2:9-12 to the subject of government in 2:13-17, how broad is the scope of authorities we are to be subject to?
4. What is the purpose of human governing authorities as Peter describes it here?
5. What basis or motivation does Peter offer for why we should be subject to every human institution?
6. Is there a limit to our obedience to the government? What guidance does Peter offer for when the government opposes or oppresses Christians for their faith? (see also 2:20-25)

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. When it comes to politics, do you find yourself inclined to criticize at a safe distance, to get involved, to avoid them all together, or somewhere in between?
8. What is the basis or motivation for your general posture to politics (what you described in #7)? How does that line up with the basis and motivation Peter describes here (#5 above)?
9. What general guidelines for political engagement can we draw from this passage? Test those guidelines on a current political question and discuss what you learn.

¹³ Moore, 153.