

Colossians

Christianity & Politics

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Introduction

Briefly repeat Colossians theme and relationship between spirituality and society. Over the next two weeks, we are going to violate the double-taboo—talk about religion **and** politics! Specifically, we will examine the relationship between **Christianity and politics**. Specifically, I want to address the questions: **How involved should Christians be in the political process?** and **What goals should we pursue?**

KEY QUALIFICATIONS:

I am not an expert in political science. Many of you know far more about government and politics than I do.

I am not trying to give you a catalogue of political prescriptions. There are so many variables, the issues are so complex, etc. that this is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, I want to provide you with biblical framework and principles that can inform your prayerful reflection and action in this important area. This can also save us from repeating some disastrous mistakes Christians have made in the past.

I want to lay the groundwork by addressing some key basic questions . . .

What are God's purposes for civil government and the church?

PURPOSE:

Civil government: To restrain evil (Rom. 13:4) and to preserve social order (1 Tim. 2:2). The government is not charged with the responsibility to create a model community, because its citizens are mainly unregenerate (UTOPIAN HERESY: religious & secular forms).

Church: To fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) and the Great Commandment (Jn. 13:34-35). The church is not responsible to usher in God's kingdom (Jesus will do that at his return), but to bear witness to God's kingdom by proclamation and community.

MEANS:

Civil government: By regulating outward behavior. God authorizes it to use external force to accomplish its purpose (Rom. 13:4).

Church: By persuading people to receive God's inward regeneration and transformation (2 Cor. 5:20). God forbids it to use external force to accomplish its purpose (Jn. 18:36-37).

How should civil government and the church relate to one another?

As you can see from the above, there is no intrinsic conflict between civil government and the church. The same God has called both of them to play different, though complementary, roles. This is what theologians call "sphere sovereignty."

Jesus affirmed this in Matt. 22:21 (read). When people tried to get him to choose for obeying God rather than obeying the civil authorities, he denied that there was an intrinsic contradiction. He affirmed that "Caesar" (civil government) has a proper role, and therefore has authority demand from its subjects what it needs to discharge its role (taxes, etc.). But he also circumscribed civil government's authority by saying ". . . and render to God what is God's." When the state usurps God's role as ultimate authority, it is out of bounds. **[1]**

The trouble comes when either exceeds its boundaries. History is full of such examples. And in a fallen world, in which neither church nor state escapes its corrupting influence, their relationship is often characterized by tension.

When the state usurps the role of God, it views the church as a threat and persecutes it (ROMAN EMPIRE; NAZI GERMANY; COMMUNIST RUSSIA & CHINA; FUNDAMENTALIST MUSLIM STATES). While God works sovereignly to spread the gospel in this situation (STATS & Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church"), it is not the ideal situation for the church's mission (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

When the state becomes subordinate to the church, they use external force to convert people or punish non-Christians (INQUISITION; CRUSADES; GENEVA; CROMWELL). Concerning the Puritan experiment under Cromwell, "Never were the ideals loftier, or the self-dedication of

men to them more complete and sincere, or the courage with which they were striven for more amazing, yet never was defeat more defeat more absolute and humiliating." [2]

When the state grants the church favored status by establishing a state-supported church, this undermines the integrity of evangelism because it encourages nominalism. James Madison: "During almost fifteen centuries the legal establishment of Christianity has been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution." [3]

NOTE: In contrast to both of the above errors, civil government should not give Christianity a favored status over other religions. Instead, a "principled pluralism" in which the state protects the freedom of all religions (as long as they comply with civil law) is the most biblical approach. "Thus as we stand for religious freedom today, we need to realize that this must include a general religious freedom from the control of the state for all religion. It will not mean just freedom for those who are Christians. It is then up to Christians to show that Christianity is the Truth of total reality in the open marketplace of ideas." [4]

When the church becomes too cozy with the state. The church that is in this position also tends to become naively uncritical of the state and rationalize its conformity in the name of "submission to the governing authorities" (NAZI GERMANY; SOUTH AFRICA). Philip Yancey: "The church works best as a force of resistance, a counterbalance to the consuming power of the state. The cozier it gets with the state, the more watered-down it becomes and the less able to challenge the surrounding culture." [5]

How should Christians respond to their civil rulers?

There will be a certain tension on this issue . . .

On the one hand, because civil rulers are instituted by God, we should:

Pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1,2) that they may fulfill the role God has given them.

Many of us may have a secular/sacred dichotomy in this area similar to what I described last week concerning the work-place. We may regard praying for missions, others' salvation and spiritual growth as spiritual, but not this area.

Respect and honor them because of the office God has put them in (Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17).

Nero was emperor when Paul and Peter made these statements. He had not yet become a fanatical persecutor of Christians, but he was by no means the personification of integrity and moral leadership! Make the distinction between lifestyle/character and the office with Clinton!

Obey their laws (including paying your taxes)—not just because of fear of punishment, but primarily out of respect for God who put them there (Rom. 13:1,5; 1 Pet. 2:13).

On the other hand, because civil government is fallen and subject to corruption (even to the point of Antichrist—see Rev. 13:7), we should:

Call it to its proper role, thereby serving as its conscience. Paul did this when Roman officials treated him unjustly (Acts 16:37). We should do this ourselves—not just for ourselves, but also on behalf of others .

Martin Niemoller lamented that the German Christians didn't do this in the early years under Hitler: MARTIN NIEMOLLER: "In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up." [6]

Resist and disobey its commands when it commands us to do what God forbids (Dan. 3:18-19; early Christians refusing to worship Caesar; Rev. 13:15), or when it forbids us to do what God commands (Acts 4:19; 5:29). But even here, we are to submit to the consequences (non-violent civil disobedience) or flee to another country—but not armed revolt (AMERICAN REVOLUTION?).

What kind of civil government does God recommend?

God does not prescribe any specific kind of government for this age.

Old Covenant theocracy is not applicable today. Some of its principles are profitable (separation of priests and rulers; regulate social evil vs. demand righteousness), but this form of government is for Israel and not for the Church Age.

The New Testament church operated under a totalitarian government (Rome), but does not endorse that form of government.

Historically, the church has been able to flourish and fulfill its role under all sorts of governments, as long as it stays focused on its purpose and understands its proper relationship with the state.

Cultures that have been deeply influenced by the biblical worldview, however, have developed democracy because it expresses certain crucial biblical truths:

Because all people have dignity as God's image-bearers, it seems reasonable that they should be able to participate in the decisions of government (voting in representatives, laws, amendments, etc.).

Because all people are fallen, it seems reasonable that government should have safety systems built in to make despotism more difficult (term limits; separation of powers; etc.).

Here is an irony. On the one hand, a biblical world-view has influenced civil government by creating democracy. On the other hand, this development creates greater ambiguity for Christians living in democratic countries, because scripture gives us no specific directions or examples on how involved in the political process we should be. We'll take this up **NEXT** by addressing the following questions:

How involved in the political process should Christians living in a democracy be?

What dangers should we avoid in our involvement?

What positive principles should guide our involvement?

Footnotes

[1] "What made him give the second phrase . . . ? The answer, I believe, is found on the reverse face of the coin, which showed Tiberius' mother represented as the goddess of peace, along with the words **highest priest**. The blasphemous words commanded the worship of Caesar; they thus exceeded the state's authority." Charles W. Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 114.

[2] Robert Culver, *Toward a Biblical View of Government* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 278.

[3] John Seel, "Nostalgia for a Lost Empire," *No God But God*, Os Guinness and John Seel, editors (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 69.

[4] Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1981), p.46.

[5] Philip Yancey, "A State of Ungrace," *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1997, p. 35.

[6] Cited in Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (William Morrow & Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 125.