

Gospel Perspective on Politics Part 2

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[0 : 00] And the topic this morning is how do the state and church relate? How do the state and the church relate? Maybe a better way of framing this is how does religion interact with government?

Now I use that word religion because religion is much broader than just the state. I'm defining religion as all good attorneys do to define their terms. Religion is how do we answer ultimate questions about our life and then prescribing actions based on those answers.

So how does religion, these ultimate questions, interact with government? Let's pray and then we'll dive into this question together.

Father in heaven, we thank you for this time together. We thank you for your Lord, the Lord Jesus. Give us insight. Lord, this topic is often confusing and complex.

Lord, give us clarity. Bind our hearts together. Love the church. Father, give us an anchor in these church lives. Father, for your namesake, would the church live as you call it?

[1 : 18] Father, for your namesake, would the church live as you call it? As a people for your own possession. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So how am I going to answer this question?

Thankfully, Christianity was not started the year you and I were born.

In fact, there have been Christians who have carried the same burdens we face today. Who have thought through these questions and made mistakes.

And we can learn from them. There's no phrase, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. So, in light of that, I want to have this discussion in light of church history. Through the lens of church history. And one of the lessons you often find in church history is that you realize that old errors are so often recycled and repackaged in new forms.

Right? There's nothing new on this side. So to face the challenge of a culture that might be unraveling like a cheap sweater, we can go further back in time to men and women who have thought through these things, carry the same burdens, and have wisdom for us.

[2 : 32] And so for the second half of the class, I'm going to reference Augustine. Augustine. One of those early church fathers in the 5th century from North Africa.

Now, you might not agree with everything Augustine has to say. But he does have a wonderful way of framing the issue for us in the 21st century. So to give us a road map of where we're headed on this journey, we're going to talk about the context of the early church.

Then Constantine. Third, the crisis. And fourth, the Magnus Otis. And what's Augustine's Magnus Opus?

The City of God. That book, The City of God. It took him 13 years to write that. The City of God. So let's start with the context of the early church. So I want to picture yourself in 5th century Rome. You're going to take a time machine. We're going to travel to about 410 A.D. If you were living then, you may have heard stories of the horrible, twisted, violent persecution that Christians faced.

[3 : 43] Because of their allegiance to Christ, Christians were slandered, mocked, misrepresented, nailed crosses, lit on fire, and made and torn apart by animals.

Christians often were scapegoated in Rome. To describe this time, a 2nd century pastor, Petulian, once said, If the Tiber River rises too high or the Nile too low, the cry is, The Christians to the lion! These Christians were scapegoated. And to face a death, they were witnesses of the risen Christ. This was reality. And often this persecution would be top down from the emperors.

Top down from the emperors. So unlike today, there was no voting for the emperors on election day. No consent of the governor. In this context, Paul would tell Christians in Romans chapter 13, verse 1, to give the government their due.

He writes, 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.

[5 : 01] And so scripture says, earthly governments are ordained by God to administer justice. And believers are to be subject to their authority. Even unjust governments.

Even unjust governments. Peter writes, honor the emperor. Yeah, even the corrupt one, like Nero. Honor the emperor. Christians are to honor the very governments that later would arrest the next week then.

Why would anyone do this? 1 Peter 2, verse 21 tells us, 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. So submit to the civil authorities, pay your taxes, honor the emperor, and when reviled, do not revile in return. That's the rule.

Now, of course, there are limits on disobedience. Some of us want to immediately go to the exception. We collaborate, but we never compromise.

[6 : 11] We collaborate, but we never compromise. There are places where we cannot go. Like our modern day, Romans consider themselves inclusive and tolerant.

And tolerant. So inclusive and tolerant. But there's a catch. Rome was tolerant as long as you accept the status quo. And the status quo involved taking part in religious worship of the emperor. You know, bow down. Offer some incense. It's not a big deal. It's a big deal, Christian. Be a good Roman citizen and bow down to the emperor. And this is where Christians ran into trouble. And does anyone know what Christians were called for their refusal to worship the Roman pantheon? Atheists. Atheists. Why were they called atheists? They didn't seem to believe in the gods.

Right. They worshiped this god who was invisible. They didn't worship the visible pantheon of gods. They were atheists. And many consider Christians to be dangerous to the unity of the empire.

[7 : 16] Threats to society. I mean, you can almost picture, like, imagine yourself a Roman official. Right. These Christians were gathering together. The upper class slaves and women were calling each other brother and sister.

Right. We even heard that they drank the blood and ate the flesh of this king Jesus whom they worshiped. What in the world is going on? Right.

These Christians were odd. They're weird. They're suspicious. Now, we live in the 21st century, but we have first century problems. Right.

But we also have an opportunity to live out first century Christianity. When Christianity becomes increasingly weird and suspicious in our culture. But as you listen to these stories, in the 5th century Rome, of the context of the early church, maybe you hear how everything changed under Constantine.

There was the Constantinian moments where things suddenly turned upside down. In 312 AD, Christians found a champion in Emperor Constantine.

[8 : 26] In some ways, this is a very paradoxical age. So we're going to break this down by looking at the beautiful and the good, and then we're going to get into the ugly. So let's start with the beautiful and the good of Constantine.

Now, picture yourself. Imagine witnessing family and friends martyred. And then very suddenly, Christians are supported. To illustrate how sudden this was, Roman officials kissed the broken hands of the Christians whom they had tortured.

And understand, Constantine didn't just proclaim freedom of religion for Christians, but initially it was for everyone. No longer fearing for your life.

That's good. Constantine restored property and legal rights to Christians. He subsidized the building of new church buildings. He even organized church councils.

A force in the passing of the Nicene Creed, which brought unity to Christians, declaring that Jesus is Lord over and against the heresy of Arianism.

[9 : 30] For Constantine, it brought unity to the Roman Empire. For Constantine, and most historians recognize this, it represents a turning point in the Western world.

Previously marginalized Christianity began to be a driving cultural force in the Roman Empire. And even Emperor Constantine at this point claims to be a Christian.

So imagine yourself in that context. What do you do when now the leader of the emperor claims to be a Christian, and Christianity is now a driving cultural force in the Roman Empire?

So this is the advent of Christendom. What do you do? What would you do where the majority in society now call themselves Christians? Now, I think we need some intellectual humility in the 21st

century.

Philip Yancey, a Christian author, once recounted a conversation with a Muslim, who said, I find no guidance in the Koran on how a Muslim should live as a minority in the society, and no guidance in the New Testament on how Christians should live as a majority.

[10 : 43] Now, that might be overstated. Right? But he's touching on something there, isn't he? Right? If you approach the Bible with the question, what's the right political order, you're not going to find the answer.

It's the wrong question. But it does answer this question very clearly. What is the church? The Bible has a lot to say about what is the church.

So your understanding of ecclesiology is going to influence your thinking on political theology. And Nick touched on this last week. And initially, I had 30 minutes of just expositing what is the nature of the doctrine of the church this morning, but I took it out.

But your ecclesiology is going to influence your political theology. So a lot of Presbyterians and Baptists have different political theologies because of based on how we understand the church. And we understand Christianity is not just about having your sins forgiven. Right? Christianity touches our political life. Remember we said last week, this is important, but not ultimate.

[11 : 49] The Greek word polis, from which we get the word political, simply means city. How is the city working? Right? And we're serving on the mount people.

Poor in spirit. Mourning and thirsting. After righteousness. Christians care about what God cares about. Human flourishing. Protecting the innocent from being falsely convicted.

Protecting the vulnerable. Caring for the poor. Christians now bring in their values to advocate for what is right and good in Rome. And this begins to influence the Roman Empire in good ways.

Right? Women were second class citizens back then in the ancient world. And because of Christianity's influence, the lowest in society started to gain some more legal protections. Women now could control property.

Women now were protected from sexual assault. Mothers were given legal rights over their children, whereas former women and adopters had those rights. Not to mention, you know, the efforts to protect slaves, the poor.

[12 : 54] The practice of infanticide was outlawed, where unwarranted babies were left to wild animals and cast into sewers. Abortion was a common medical procedure.

The early church had plenty to say about that. And so from the beginning, Christians believed these people had value. Made in the image of God. Money from the imperial treasury was used to help desperate parents who couldn't afford to keep children.

And the church acted as sort of a distribution system that the Roman government would use. So this is something we can thank God for. Right? Today we have a lot of non-Christian politicians who say, you know, of course human rights.

But friend, there was no of course human rights in ancient Rome. If you believe in human rights, then you can thank Christianity for that. Now for us, this doesn't necessarily mean being involved in institutional politics.

through the government. But it might. It might. Maybe God will call some of you to run for mayor, or city council, or a senate. So how would this kind of public witness work today?

[14 : 05] Christians in the public square. Well, a senator or citizen can argue for a policy on the basis of your Christianity. But the government cannot adopt that position because of Christianity.

So influence, but not to institutionalize Christianity. That would violate the anti-establishment clause of the First Amendment. That's the soil in which our representative democracy was founded.

Christians can and should influence government for the common good. As someone once said, the early church wasn't a thermometer. They were a thermostat that transformed society.

Does anyone know who said that? Does anyone know? Sounds really good to anyone? That was Martin King Jr. in a letter in Birmingham jail. The idea that Christians brought their values for the common good was the civil rights movement.

So just laws are a good thing. But remember, laws cannot change the human heart. Laws cannot do the works of culture. Now, one of the reasons why we don't institutionalize Christianity, which John is going to get to next week.

[15 : 20] Does anyone know why we, in our accounting, we didn't want to institutionalize one specific denomination? They didn't want the religious strife from Europe to come here.

Right. Yeah. And that religious strife was here. It was here. The Baptists were the ones who were exiled in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts because they refused to practice the baptism. So the legacy of religious liberty, John's going to get to next week, but that, in part, was due to the fact that Baptists were on the wrong end of religious persecution.

Now, some Christians believe if we just pass the right laws, if we just institutionalize Christianity, that will solve the moral decay of our times. But that's chasing after a mirage. Laws cannot do what only the gospel can do.

So that's the good side. I mean, let's get to the ugly. So we're going back to Constantine. There was a darker side. Remember, Christians found a champion under Constantine.

[16:28] Constantine was called the capital-L liberator of the church. He was called a Christian emperor by men like Eusebius of Caesarea. The church began to have power and wealth, and so nominalism skyrocketed at that point.

If you wanted a career in politics, you were expected to be a Christian under Constantine. But that wasn't the only problem. You may recall hearing in some Western civ class that he took in college the story where Constantine saw a sign in the sky, and when he and his entire army looked up, he saw a Cairo, or a cross, with the words, conquer by this sign.

Conquer by this sign. You find meteorologists trying to figure out, how did this all work? How did they find that apparition in the sky? But Constantine put the sign of the cross on the shield of his soldiers, crusading and conquering under the banner of the cross.

He hardly ever lost a battle, and he was a ruthless man. In John 18, Peter is rebuked for drawing the sword after Jesus' arrest.

And what does Jesus tell Pilate when he's at his trial? My kingdom's not of this world. My kingdom is not of this world. If it were of this world, my servants would be fighting.

[17:54] So the Christ kingdom does not advance through course of power, but through the word. We don't fight fire with fire. Civil governments cannot cause conversions.

You know, the sword, convert or die! That doesn't happen. That cannot happen. So now you see what's happening here under Constantine. Now there's confusion of categories.

The church and the state are now molding together. And theologians at that time began linking Constantine's rule with the rule of God.

Jerome, one of the church fathers, said, Rome was an earthly reflection of the kingdom of heaven.

You know, someone once said, I think Nick Vizenti told me this, this is like Trump on stairways.

Right? You hear this rhetoric today. Right? Ronald Reagan, in his farewell address, famous, he said, America is the shining city on a hill.

[18:53] Drawed upon Matthew 5, verse 14, in the top of the last week. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill, set on a hill, cannot be hidden. And the you there is not referring to America, it's referring to the church.

But the temptation to confuse categories is bipartisan. Unfortunately, blasphemy is bipartisan on both sides of the aisle. In 2021, President Biden, speaking of the American military going to Afghanistan, quoted Isaiah chapter 6, verse 8.

The Lord says, Whom shall I send? Who shall go for us? Biden then said, The American military has been answering for a long time. Here I am, Lord, send me.

Here I am, send me. God's saving mission is not a military campaign to blow up buildings in Kabul. Let me ask this question, what kind of problems does this create for the gospel witness in places like Afghanistan? Where God's purposes are American military campaigns overseas.

[20:00] What kind of problems does this create for Christians for the gospel witness overseas? Well, if you look at Nazi Germany where the church caved to Hitler and did not stand up as a witness against the government, terrible, terrible confusion over what Christianity is and what it meant.

And my sister-in-law who's Jewish and she really doesn't want to hear about Christianity because of her parents and her parents' experience in Europe.

she quakes Nazism and Christianity. That's that. That's what he said. So, if I were into the Taliban, Christian and American would mean the same thing to me.

And both hateful. Yeah, that's true. Afghan Christians could be pro-America because what else could they be? Yeah, it seems like you justify violence on the other side to tell them it's all power politics.

There is no alternative. Yeah. Right. Tom pointed this out to me that when Rome identified as a Christian empire, a great persecution arose amongst Persian Christians because the governments thought native Persian Christians must have been with Rome.

[21 : 35] Yeah. So now there is suspicion for Christians in Persia. And there would be suspicion, I mean, this kind of rhetoric would cause suspicions for Christians in Venezuela whose government doesn't align with American interests.

So, we do a lot of damage to gospel witness overseas if we're aligning America with Christ and they're both the same. Now, in 2021, a lot of us heard the term Christian nationalism all over the news and you hear it today.

Most people have no idea what it means but it sounds scary, right? It sounds aggressive, authoritarian, Christian nationalism. After January 6th, don't get me wrong, there was a lot ugly in America, but after January 6th, I think it became a dog whistle word in a smear campaign among some of the media.

Why? Because it is a way of lumping together those in the crowd that broke into the capital with normal Christians who are engaged in politics. Guilt by association. I mention that because there's such a temptation to just slap a label on someone, right, rather than to listen to them and to ask questions.

You think governments should promote traditional family structures? You're a Christian nationalist. You support police reform? That sounds really woke to me. So you don't really engage with someone, you just slap a label on them.

[23 : 05] And we should not do that as a church. Right? Let's listen to each other, ask questions, rather than really assume that someone is a Christian nationalist because of their political preferences, not necessarily a theological commandment.

Any questions? And then we're going to get to the crisis and then Augustus. Any questions? How long was Constantine's reign? That's a good question. Anyone know?

Okay. I was just wondering how quickly everything degenerated. Yeah. I noticed conversion was unexpected. Long enough to change things.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Someone can look to Google it and then look at that. Well, probably not 31 years.

31 years. 31 years. Okay. That's fine. Thank you. So, we have the context here of the church. Constantine. Let's get to the crisis. Let's get to the crisis.

[24 : 11] Fast forward the years 410 AD. We're back in the Roman Empire and the empire is teetering on the verge of collapse. So imagine 50 years from now, America is no longer a country.

That would be shocking for a lot of us. But America is a toddler compared to Rome. Rome had been around for almost a thousand years. And the barbarians, the Visigoths, later the Germans would sack Rome and things began to unravel in Rome.

This was a crisis of the culture. And maybe some of us feel some of that crisis today. You know, God's providence is a sign of those very Germans would later become Christians.

So, and a thousand years later, there was a man who came forth from the Germans. Martin Luther. So, Fred, maybe those radical, crazy, pagan, non-Christian neighbors of ours, maybe there's a Martin Luther among them.

I don't know. Alright, but now during this crisis in God's providence, many refugees fled to North Africa who would meet and talk with one North African bishop, Augustine.

[25 : 20] And Augustine's magnus opus, the city of God, it took him 13 years to write this. And he started writing it pretty soon after Rome collapsed. Augustine's and it's been a foundational text for Western political thought.

This is why I'm referencing Augustine. And you could draw a direct line of Augustine thought, especially of human depravity and original sin, to the founding fathers of the draft of the Constitution.

What do I mean by that? So if you look at Augustine, Augustine influenced Martin Luther. Martin Luther taught Calvin. Calvin taught John Edwards. John Edwards taught John Witherspoon.

And John Witherspoon taught James Madison. And Madison wrote the Federalist Papers, which has a very strong Augustinian bent to it. And Madison would draft the Constitution.

So Madison and the framers had a very realistic understanding of man's fallen nature when creating our system of government. And John, again, is going to talk about this next week.

[26 : 24] Now, Augustine doesn't start out to be a political philosopher, but as a pastor. He is doing a couple of things in the city of God. First, he's refuting the contention that Christianity is responsible for the collapse of the Roman Western Empire, the Western Roman Empire.

And second, he's comforting the sheep. These are refugees that are coming, and he wants to comfort them. And if you want to start reading this in the city of God, book 19, start there.

The most bang for your buck. Book 19, chapter 17, that's where you should start. So, there are six thoughts from the city of God applied for today. And here's what I think Augustine would want to tell our church in a cultural crisis.

One, do not panic. Do not panic. The loss of any Christian influence in America does not follow him to question God's faithfulness.

Because he would say, don't confuse America with the city of God. The city of God, he writes, is invincible, eternal, and everlasting.

[27 : 33] And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Augustine gets the title from Psalm 97, Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. Speaking of Zion, the dwelling place of God.

And he would say, look, America is just like Babylon, Assyria, and Rome. It's the city of man. Right? These rise and fall, the earthly cities passing away.

We are pilgrims and exiles who have a heavenly citizenship. That's where our allegiance lies. And we get afraid because we often confuse the two.

In the city of God, Augustine has a conversation partner named Scipio Africanus. Scipio is asked the question, what is a society?

What makes up a culture? Scipio responds with, well, it's an assembly united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right in a community of interest.

[28 : 35] So, in other words, a society that has the same values. Or we could say it's a nation that has biblical values. The same sense of what is right.

But Augustine would say, Scipio, that's great. But that's the city of God. A society of people united with the conviction of what is right, that is the city of God.

It's not the city of man. So, number one, do not panic. Two, low expectations. Low expectations. America will disappoint you. When Augustine was preaching to refugees, you would probably say something like this.

Look, you've been through tragedy. Many of you have been mistreated, slandered, harmed by others. Rome and the culture has collapsed.

[29 : 36] But remember this, Rome was always disappointed and disappointed. So, I say the same to you. In the same way, this election season, America will disappoint you.

Have low expectations. Modesty of ambition. Three, there's a spiritual conflict between these two cities.

There's a spiritual conflict between these two cities. His entire argument can be summed up in this sentence, in the city of God. He writes, accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves.

The earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God. The heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former in the word glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.

So, what he's saying is, the city of God and the city of man are in conflict. I mean, this is the message we saw in Revelation. Remember that? Christians attempting to worship the beast of the political power in Rome.

[30 : 45] Now, some might say at this point, okay, I agree with you, Augustine, so, Christians should be like the French resistance. We'll go under and we'll start fighting the Nazis. We'll just go underground.

So, you hear some of that today. But, Augustine wouldn't go that far. He wouldn't go that far because the fourth principle, and here's the twist.

There's a conflict between these two cities, but Christians occupy both cities at the same time. Christians occupy both cities at the same time. We have a dual citizenship.

So, the earthly city also contains members of the city of God. And so, that's why Augustine would say, this is not like the Nazis fighting versus the allies in World War II. We also are citizens of the earthly city.

So, there is both, and here's the wisdom of Augustine here. He's saying there's both an involvement, but there's also a detachment from the earthly city.

[31 : 51] There's tension in that, isn't there? I think that's what the balance that Nick was really trying to get at last week. these things are important, but they're not ultimate. And there's a tension.

Be a citizen of Babylon, but remain in exile. Engage in politics, but don't succumb to political idolatry. Obey the emperor, but above all, obey God.

How desperately we need the Holy Spirit to do this while in our public life. One example, I love how one person illustrated this in the second century, the letter of Diocatis.

And the author wrote this, Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. From nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life.

They live in their own countries, but only as sojourners. They participate in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign.

[33 : 04] They marry, as do all others, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh.

They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They are cursed, but they blessed. They are insulted, yet they offer it. I just love how he captures how Christians are in both cities at once.

We're in the world, but we're not of it. Fifth principle, work for the welfare of the earthly city.

Augustine says, work for the welfare of the earthly city. So this is the Daniel principle where God told the Jews in Babylon, Jeremiah 29, verse 7, 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. I'm going to repeat that last part. For in its welfare you will find your welfare. And so he understood politics was seeking the good of the city that God placed them in.

[34 : 20] In the city of man's welfare, Christians will find our welfare. So although there is a conflict, there is also common interest in life in the earthly city.

So in earthly political life, Christians can be united in these earthly goods with non-Christians. And Augustine will use illustrations like seeing society prosper, food, shelter, these are good things. things. A well-run police force is a good thing. Stable families are good things, laughing together over a meal. He sums it up in this phrase, earthly peace.

Earthly peace is a good thing. In the earthly city's welfare, we will find our welfare. So Augustine saw that we could be united by common interest with non-Christians and there will be a spiritual conflict, both at the same time.

Now of course, and Augustine recognizes this, our society doesn't share the same values of what is good and evil, right? But we can work for areas of common ground that we both can work toward.

[35 : 36] And we love these things in different ways. Christians love is always in the context of a greater love for God. So we love earthly peace not for earthly peace in itself.

We love these things because God is the one who gives them to us. They are gifts from God, right? So we can be thankful for the many good gifts that God has given to us as Americans.

I'm one of the types that I get choked up singing the National Anthem. I don't know why, I just start getting teary-eyed. And it's okay to thank God sincerely for being an American.

There's nothing wrong with that. But ultimately we thank God for those things. And our allegiance is to God. And the sixth principle, and then we'll open up for questions and comments, the sixth principle is ground your hope in the heavenly city.

Ground your hope in the heavenly city. There's a story, again, of Scipio Africanus. He conquers Rome's most bitter enemy, Carthage, at the site of the city perishing amidst the flames.

[36 : 46] it is said that Scipio burst into tears. He had just destroyed Rome's greatest enemy. And someone asked Scipio, why are you weeping?

He replied, this is a glorious moment, but I have a dread foreboding that someday the same doom will be pronounced on my own country.

Scipio was weeping because one day what happened to Carthage will happen to Rome. Augustine would agree with that. What happened to Carthage, what happened to Rome, we pray that this doesn't happen, but one day it will happen to America.

The earthly city is temporary. Politics are temporary when you measure them against the city of God. That's where our hope lies. ground your hope in the heavenly city.
So those are the six principles. Do not panic. Low expectations. Spiritual conflict. Christians occupy both at the same time.
[37 : 55] Work for your welfare in the earthly city. And above all.