

Christianity & Politics 1

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[0:00] So this is a recording, the first session of the adult class, Christianity and Politics, taught at Trinity Baptist Church on March 7, 2021. The initial session wasn't recorded in full, so I'm recording, re-recording the session now for those who will listen later on.

Opening disclaimer to this class, the topic of Christianity and Politics is controversial and challenging. I think we probably all agree on that. At times, discussions about Christianity and Politics have caused or exposed divisions between Christian believers, between family members and friends. And so we don't approach this topic carelessly or lightly. At the same time, I also believe that it's not healthy for a church to completely avoid discussing a topic that the Bible speaks to in many places. Romans 12 says, don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. In other words, we don't let the Bible's teaching renew us from the inside out and transform us. We'll tend to get dragged down into the fallen and ungodly ways of this present world. And probably all of us can identify some of those ungodly patterns.

So I'm not going to begin this class by commenting on the most recent elections or assessing the latest political trends or sharing my strongest political opinions. I do have political opinions, but that's not the point of this class. And also, in a class of this length, there's no way that I could attempt to say everything or even to say everything that I consider important and timely on a topic such as this. So if I don't address a particular issue that perhaps you think is important in this time and place, it doesn't necessarily mean that I disagree with you or that I think it's not important and relevant. But I want to begin this class by looking directly and carefully at what the Bible says about politics, about government, trusting that God has given us his word for our good in this area, as well as in every other area of life. So my hope and prayer is that through this class, we all would be more fully shaped by God's revelation in his word, even as we seek to live faithfully for Christ within the kingdoms of this world. So let's pray to that end. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We pray that you would guide our thinking and our conversations with one another on this topic, that they would be fruitful and that we would ultimately glorify you, the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords. In Jesus' name, amen. So what is the first question I want to begin with today is what does the Bible say about government in general, about its purpose as well as its dangers?

And broadly speaking, the Bible holds together two perspectives. First, the Bible teaches that governments are God's servants for our good. Governments are instituted to restrain evil and to provide some measure of stability and justice in this fallen world. So Romans 13 says, the authorities that exist have been instituted by God. They are God's servants for your good.

[3:22] By promoting peace and order, freedom and flourishing, good government also enables the church to carry out its redemptive mission. If you go to 1 Timothy 2, it's a passage where the apostle Paul urges Christians to pray for civil authorities, for kings and all those in authority so that we may lead peaceful and godly lives. And then he goes on in verses 3 and 4 to say, this is good because God desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And there's an interesting progression there where Paul begins by saying, pray for the government so that we as God's people can live peaceful and godly lives so that many people may come to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

In other words, good government enables the church to carry out its redemptive mission in God's providence. We can see that in the early church. The early church spread very quickly through the first century Roman empire. And part of the reason it was able to spread so quickly is because the Roman government had built all of these roads that enabled travel to happen much more quickly than in some other parts of the world. It was also a period of relative stability in the Roman empire, which enabled the Christian gospel to spread quickly. So we should be thankful today for the blessings that our government provides. I mean, think about it. Public safety, well-maintained roads, electricity and other utilities, mail delivery, stable currency, all kinds of things that enable us as a church to meet regularly, to communicate with one another, to proclaim the gospel, and to support missionaries throughout the world. So governments are God's servants for our good. And that's sort of the creation of God's good creational intent for government. But on the other hand, we live in a fallen world. And so the Bible also teaches that governments in this fallen world tend to become evil beasts. Psalm 2 talks about the nations of the world, the rulers of the world, raging and conspiring to overthrow the rightful authority of God. And the Bible recognizes in many places that governments can not only restrain evil and injustice, but they can also at times perpetrate or promote evil and injustice. Pharaoh enslaved Israelites and eventually was trying to exterminate them. Jesus himself was condemned to death by the civil authorities of his time, Pilate and Herod. In Daniel and Revelation, these apocalyptic books compare world empires to a series of terrifying and devouring beasts. At the same time, those same passages remind us that God is still sovereign. God is still on the throne, even over the most unrighteous of worldly governments. So that's what the Bible says about government in general. It's God's servant for our good, and it can tend to become an evil beast that devours and causes great evil.

So how should God's church relate to earthly governments? We see a variety of different arrangements and a sort of progression from the Old Testament to the New Testament and how God's church, God's people, is to relate to the state that is earthly governments. So from the Exodus until the Babylonian exile, the people of Israel were a nation state. They were called to be a nation state under the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law described Israel as a kingdom of priests, as a holy nation. It not only provided spiritual guidance for God's people, but also prescribed civil penalties for those who disobeyed the law of God. And under King David and his successors, the Davidic kingdom attempted to put the ideals of the Mosaic law into practice. However, it quickly divided and became corrupt like all the other nations. And eventually, the Davidic kingdom came to an end in the Babylonian exile in 586 BC.

So the ideal that we see in the Mosaic law of God's people as sort of a united political entity was never actually realized. And so after the exile to Babylon, the kingdom of Israel was never fully reestablished. God's people did, many of them did return to the land of Israel. They continued to exist with varying degrees of independence from various foreign powers over the centuries. But they also continued to exist in the diaspora. For example, Queen Esther did not return with the exile, with the other exiles from Persia. She stayed in Persia. And there was a community of Jews who remained in Persia, as well as remained in many other parts of the world. And we see an interesting passage in Jeremiah 29.

Jeremiah 29 records a letter written to the Jewish exiles who were living in Babylon. And those exiles wanted to get back to Jerusalem immediately. But instead, Jeremiah urged them, seek the shalom, that is the peace and order, the well-being and flourishing of the city to where I have sent you into exile. And Jeremiah continues, pray for its shalom, for its peace, for in its peace, you will find your peace. In a shalom, you will find your shalom. And this is sort of a new idea in the Old Testament that God's people can flourish even as a minority living under a pagan government, as the Israelites were living under in Babylon. And when we turn to the New Testament, the New Testament echoes these Old Testament instructions to God's people in exile. The New Testament describes Christians as exiles in this present world. It says, we're waiting for God's kingdom to come in full when Christ returns. So Hebrews 13 says, here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Or 1 Peter 1 speaks of Christians as elect exiles of the dispersion. In other words,

[9:30] God's chosen people, but were exiled and scattered throughout the kingdoms of this world. And so the New Testament also seems to discourage the idea of trying to establish a united Christian political kingdom on earth. For example, John 18, when Jesus is arrested, he insists, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting. Jesus insists that his kingdom does not spread through military force. Acts 1, Jesus' disciples come to him and say, Lord, are you going to, after his resurrection, they say, Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel? And Jesus' response is interesting. He sort of redirects their focus. He says, it's not for you to know the times or dates that the Father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you'll be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

So Jesus redirects their focus from sort of the restoration of a united political kingdom in Israel to going out into the ends of the earth to be ambassadors of the risen and returning King Jesus.

And so that's, we'll look a little later at what the New Testament says to Christians about how Christians specifically should relate to the government, but that's sort of the broad picture we see how the church and state might relate together. But before we get to the epistles and Paul and Peter's instructions to Christians, let's look at the gospels. And the question I want to look at in the gospels is how did Jesus and his disciples navigate political controversies in their day?

And one observation I want to make is that Jesus' own disciples included those from opposite ends of the political spectrum in his day. So most notably the 12, the inner circle included Simon the Zealot.

Now Zealots were ardent Jewish nationalists who advocated violent revolt against the Roman government. Jesus' 12 disciples also included Matthew, the tax collector. Jewish tax collectors were employees of the pagan Roman government and they were seen as self-serving and dishonest collaborators with an ungodly regime. And so on the same, in the same group of 12 disciples, you have someone who comes from a zealot background who hangs out with people who were talking about revolting against the government and you have a government employee and Jesus calls them to be part of his team together. And of course, after Jesus' resurrection, the church spread out from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and Judea to the ends of the earth. And so the potential for differing political views and backgrounds within the church throughout the world has only increased. It's not just Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. It's people from nations and tribes that have been at war with one another, being part of the same church together and figuring out how do we be reconciled and live at peace together and grow in wisdom and seek the truth together. So Jesus' disciples included, and back then and today include those from opposite ends of the political spectrum. However, the other thing that we need to see is that the process of discipleship, the process of being with Jesus in the community of his disciples necessarily includes a rethinking of political assumptions and a reshaping of political loyalties, right? Simon the Zealot couldn't just hold on to all his zealot beliefs as a disciple of Jesus when Jesus said things like, turn the other cheek or pay the tax that you owe. And Matthew, the tax collector, couldn't just sort of bring in all of his self-serving or dishonest ways when Jesus consistently called tax collectors to repentance. And you see, whenever Jesus gathered his 12 disciples, Simon and Matthew were both in that circle brought together under a greater loyalty and a greater love for Jesus, their King.

[14:00] So we have a couple of discussion questions, and if you're listening to this on your own, you can simply reflect on these questions. If you're listening to it with somebody else, you can discuss them with one another. But the first discussion question is, why do you think Jesus intentionally recruited disciples from opposite ends of the political spectrum in his day?

Second question, have you ever struggled to find unity with other Christians whose political instincts or backgrounds differ from yours? Third, has following Jesus and being part of God's church reshaped any of your political assumptions or attitudes toward government over time and in what ways?

So you can pause the recording if you'd like to take a moment to reflect or to discuss these particular questions. But now I'll continue in the second part of our session. What does the New Testament teach about the Christian's attitude toward government, right? We've seen that governments are God's servants for our good, but they're also tend to become evil beasts that perpetrate evil and destruction.

So what does the New Testament say? Well, in general, Christians are commanded to honor and submit to the civil authorities, again, because God has instituted governments as his servants for our good. So we see many examples of this in the New Testament. Jesus paid the temple tax, even though he didn't have to. Jesus said, render to Caesar. What is Caesar's? Paul says, be subject to the governing authorities. Peter says, be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, to the emperor or to governors. And he says, live as people who are free, but not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. And of course, Paul in 1 Timothy commands us to pray for the civil authorities. Whether or not we like them, whether or not we agree with them, he commands us to pray for them. So Christians are to honor the civil authorities. That's a general emphasis. However, in some limited situations, civil disobedience is justified and appropriate, again, because governments in this fallen world tend to become evil beasts. And so sometimes God's people need to stand up and call them to account or resist when they promote evil. So Acts 5:29, the apostles refuse to stop preaching the word of God, even though they're commanded to cease and threatened with arrest and execution. And they say, we must obey God rather than men. The main leaders of the early church were at times arrested and jailed for refusing to comply with the ungodly demands of civil authority. So we see that honoring civil authorities does not necessarily mean always agreeing with them or even always obeying their commands if their commands directly promote something that God has prohibited or if they directly prohibit something that God has commanded us to do. Now, we can also see not only the direct commands to honor civil authorities, but in some limited circumstances to that civil disobedience can be justified for Christians.

We also see several examples of believers holding positions of civil authority. I think there's at least three Old Testament examples of God's people who were in positions of civil authority outside the kingdom of Israel. So not within the Davidic kingdom, not trying to sort of implement this ideal of a united political kingdom of God's people, but rather who were in different nations of the world. So in Genesis, we see Joseph, who rises to power in Egypt, and he organizes a national program of famine relief.

[17:48] We see Daniel, one of the exiles to Babylon, who exercised wisdom as a capable administrator within the Babylonian government. We see Esther, who is in Persia, who advocated on behalf of the Jews when they were threatened with extermination. So those three examples, Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, are good examples of how God's people are to function when they're in exile, when they're sort of in a foreign kingdom, or in an ungodly regime, but seeking to be an agent of God's righteousness and wisdom.

The New Testament gives us a few examples of believers holding positions of civil authority, though we don't see their stories in as much detail as those Old Testament characters, but we see tax collectors and soldiers come to be baptized by John. We see centurions. We see the proconsul of Cyprus, who becomes a believer, the treasurer of Corinth, who is an active member of the Corinthian church, and a supporter of Paul for many years. None of these people are told to immediately leave their government posts in order to follow Jesus, but being a disciple of Jesus was an even higher calling.

Now, the last question I want to deal with today is, how should Christians relate to political allies and political opponents? And I want to begin by sort of pointing to four broad errors that Christians can fall into regarding political engagement that I think are sort of unbalanced or unhelpful positions to take. So the first error that I would say would be simply withdrawal.

Sort of the idea that the church should just avoid anything related to politics because it's too controversial, it's too worldly, it's too complicated, and so the church should just keep its distance and simply talk about spiritual things and don't talk about anything that might have political implications.

But I think that that is an error because the church is called to be salt and light in the world. Christian involvement in politics and in the broader society can be a simple expression of love of neighbor. And complete withdrawal can effectively promote aspects of the status quo that are evil and unjust. Christians are not called to completely withdraw from the society that we live in but to be an agent for good within it. Now, of course, not all Christians will be involved in politics in the same way or to the same extent. And many Christians may find many ways to be positively involved in promoting good within the common good within society without directly engaging in political advocacy.

[20:41] So we might have different strategies or approaches or emphases, but the Christian approach cannot simply be to completely withdraw. Sort of the opposite of withdrawal, which I think can be sort of another error, would be the attempt to dominate.

The idea that the church should be a means to a larger political end. And we should engage all our resources for promoting justice and righteousness. We should seek to fight and win the political battles of our day.

So if the first error would say the church should completely avoid politics, the second error would be to say the church is not involved enough and has to just get more and more and more and more involved in politics.

But I think the warning that I would say on this end is that the church's primary mission that Jesus Christ has given us is not to win political battles, but to proclaim and faithfully live out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there are many other legitimate concerns and endeavors within the world that Christians can be involved in. But we need to be careful not to let those other concerns or endeavors to take the place of the centrality of Christ.

[21:52] The other thing I would say is we should take a long term view. Two, God has called us to be faithful whether or not we are successful in our lifetime. And it's also not always easy to see whether a certain movement is successful, right?

You know, politics tends to sort of swing back and forth. And so you might think we won that battle. You know, we got our party into office. And then four years later, it all flips.

And you think, oh, well, maybe we didn't actually make a lot of progress there. We just sort of set ourselves up for a bigger defeat. So it's not always easy to see what's a win in the long term.

And and so we should just be careful that we don't get attached to that as our goal. God has called us to be faithful, but not necessarily to win and not necessarily to seek to dominate the world.

So withdrawal, I think, is an error. I think domination is an error. A third error would be panic. Something saying something like this next election will usher in the end of the world unless.

[22:56] And honestly, I seem to hear rhetoric like this more and more around recent elections, probably more than we did maybe 20 years ago, 30 years ago.

But again, how do we think about this in terms of biblical principles? Well, one day Christ will return. He will judge the world in righteousness. And that's our great hope. We are looking forward to the end when Christ will return.

And in the meantime, while we're still in this present world, the Bible reminds us that God is sovereign even over bad governments. Think of all the evil empires in the Bible, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome.

And God is sufficient to sustain his people even in the most adverse of times. Also, sooner or later, God will bring judgment on wicked rulers, often by causing them or their wicked plans to self-destruct.

That's one way that God's judgment is manifest in this present age is when wickedness sort of destroys itself. And of course, you can see many examples of that throughout history. But this sort of panic or excessive fear can be rooted in or can be an indication of the last error I want to point out, which would be idolatry.

[24:09] Right. There is one political party or one political leader who will save us. Right. That would be sort of the definition of political idolatry. Now, when we put it that way, most of us would reject that position.

We would say, no, you know, even if we think even if you might think that one political party is clearly the one that that you should definitely vote for all the time. We hopefully as Christians, we'd all stop short and say, but it's not going to save us.

But again, do we fall into this error more than we realize? You know, throughout history, some political leaders have caused terrible destruction. Others are promoted much good. The legacy of most has been very mixed.

So it's appropriate for a Christian to strongly support or even publicly advocate for a political party, a political movement or political candidate. But here's the question.

If we worship Jesus Christ alone as the perfectly righteous one, Christians should also be able to acknowledge the weaknesses and flaws of the political party, the political movement or the political candidate who they most identify with.

[25:17] And if we can't or if we don't acknowledge the weaknesses and flaws of the political party or candidate or movement that we are supporting, if we can't see those weaknesses or if we are unwilling to publicly acknowledge any of them, is that a sign that we've slipped into a form of idolatry?

Where we found our righteousness in our political movement instead of measuring everything against the righteousness of Jesus Christ. On the other end, it's entirely natural and again appropriate for Christians to recognize and point out the weaknesses and errors and flaws of a political party or political movement or political candidate whom we oppose.

But again, Christians must also be distinctively shaped by Jesus' justice and mercy toward our political opponents. So are we genuinely putting Jesus' teachings into practice in the way we treat our political opponents?

Are we being quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to get angry? And that includes our interactions on social media, among other things. Are we praying? Jesus said, pray for your enemies.

Right? If you think about the people that you are most opposed to politically, do you pray for them? As Jesus taught. Are we careful not to slander or misrepresent our political opponents?

[26:42] Or those who we disagree with? Are we treating them as we would want them to treat us? And that includes looking for not only the areas where we disagree, but also looking for areas of common ground and shared concerns, as well as honestly recognizing where and why we disagree.

Now, what are Christians called to instead of withdrawal, domination, panic, or idolatry? We're called to be faithfully present in this temporary and fallen world as ambassadors of Christ and his eternal kingdom.

So let's end with a few more questions for reflection and discussion. First question. Have you felt particularly tempted by or inclined towards any of these four broad errors?

Withdrawal, domination, panic, or idolatry? And if so, why? Second, on the positive side, not only thinking about the errors that we can fall into, but think of a Christian believer who you respect, who has been faithfully present as an ambassador of Christ, maybe as a public official, maybe as a private citizen.

This could be somebody who's currently alive or someone you've read about in history. How has this person been an example or an encouragement to you in the way that they have engaged with government and politics?

- [28 : 05] Third, if we worship Jesus Christ alone as the perfectly righteous one, Christians must also acknowledge the weaknesses and flaws of the political party, movement, or candidate that they most identify with.

Do you agree with that statement? If so, name a political party, movement, or candidate that you support or that you voted for or that you identify with. Give one reason for your support and then name one weakness or flaw that you recognize in that party, that movement, or that candidate in light of the character of Jesus.

Fourth, Christians must also be distinctively shaped by Jesus' justice and mercy toward those whom we see as political opponents. So, name a political party or movement or candidate that you oppose or disagree with or voted against.

And then think about how are you seeking to follow Jesus' commands and how you relate to that person or that group of people or their allies and supporters on an ongoing basis.

Finally, let me just mention a few recommended resources that are listed on the handout. We are not endorsing every word that each of these authors say, but I do think these books offer some helpful guidance and food for thought for American Christians in the present day.

- [29 : 23] Go into some of the present challenges in some more depth. Jonathan Lehman's book, *How the Nations Rage*. John Inazu's book, *Confident Pluralism*.

He's a law professor. He's a law professor. And a book called *Compassion and Conviction* by three authors, Gabboni, Weir, and Butler. So, feel free to check those out if those would be, if you're looking for some further reading on this topic.

Thanks. Thanks.