



Why Christians Should Seek to Influence Government for Good

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Should Christians try to influence laws and politics? Historically, Christians have disagreed. This booklet offers a historical and theological overview of the disagreement and offers an answer that lends

itself to thoughtful action. The booklet is adapted from a chapter of my book, *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*.¹ Here I begin by addressing five views of Christian involvement that I find unbiblical, incomplete, or spurious. After that, I offer a more balanced and biblical solution.

Wrong View #1: Government Should Compel Religion

The first wrong view (according to my judgment) is the idea that civil government should compel people to support or follow one particular religion.

Tragically, this “compel religion” view was held by many Christians in previous centuries. It played a large role in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) that began as a conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics over control of various territories, especially in Germany. There were many other “wars of religion” in Europe, particularly between Catholics and Protestants, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Eventually more and more Christians realized that this position is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus and inconsistent with the nature of faith itself. Today I am not aware of any major Christian group that holds to the view that government should try to compel people to follow the Christian faith.

But other religions still promote government enforcement of their religion. This is seen in countries such as Saudi Arabia, which enforce laws compelling people to follow Islam and where those who fail to comply can face severe penalties from the religious police. The law prohibits public practice of any religion other than Islam and prohibits Saudis from converting to other religions. But it must be noted that other Muslims also favor democracy and allowing for varying degrees of freedom of religion.

In the early years of the United States, support for freedom of religion in the American colonies increased because many of the colonists had fled from religious persecution in their home countries. For example, the New England Pilgrims had fled from England where they had faced fines and imprisonment for failing to attend services in the Church of England and for conducting their own church services.

Several teachings of the Bible show that “government should compel religion” is an incorrect view, one that is contrary to the teachings of the Bible itself.

1. *Genuine faith cannot be forced*

Government should never try to compel any religion because, according to the Bible, genuine religious belief cannot be compelled by force. Jesus and the New Testament apostles always *taught* people and *reasoned* with them and then *appealed* to them to make a personal decision to follow Jesus as the true Messiah. Jesus invited people, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mat 11:28; compare Acts 28:23; Rom. 10:9–10; Rev. 22:17).

Anyone who has brought up children knows that not even parents can force children to believe in

God. You can bring them to church and you can teach them the Bible, but each child must make a personal decision to trust in Jesus as his or her own Lord and Savior. Genuine faith cannot be forced.

Someone might object, “But what about laws in the Old Testament that ordered severe punishments for anyone who tried to teach another religion (see Deut. 13:6–11)? Wasn’t that part of the Bible?”

The answer is that those laws *were only for the nation of Israel for that particular time*. They were never imposed on any of the surrounding nations. Such Old Testament laws enforcing religion were never intended for people after Jesus came and established his “new covenant” (Heb. 8:8-9:28).

2. Jesus distinguished the realms of God and of Caesar

Another biblical argument against the “compel religion” view comes from Jesus’ teachings about God and Caesar. Jesus’ Jewish opponents were trying to trap him with the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (Matt. 22:18). Taking his opponents by surprise, Jesus said, “Show me the coin for the tax,” and “they brought him a denarius” (v. 19). Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:20–21).

This is a remarkable statement because Jesus shows that there are to be *two different spheres of influence*, one for the government and one for the religious life of the people of God. Some things, such as taxes, belong to the civil government (“the things that are Caesar’s”), and this implies that the church should not try to control these things. On the other hand, some things belong to people’s religious life (“the things that are God’s”), and this implies that the civil government should not try to control those things.

Jesus did not specify any list of things that belong to each category, but the mere distinction of these two categories had monumental signifi-

cance for the history of the world. It signaled a *different system* from the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, where everybody in the nation was considered a part of the people of God and they all had to obey the religious laws.

3. Freedom of religion is a biblical value

Jesus’ new teaching that the realms of “God” and “Caesar” are distinct implies freedom of religion. It implies that all civil governments—even today—should give people freedom regarding the religious faith they follow (or don’t follow), and regarding the religious doctrines they hold, and how they worship God. “Caesar” should not control such things, for they are “the things that are God’s.”

Therefore Christians in every nation should support freedom of religion and oppose any attempt by government to compel any single religion. In fact, *complete freedom of religion* should be the first principle advocated and defended by Christians who seek to influence government.

Wrong View #2: Government Should Exclude Religion

The opposite error from the “compel religion” view is “exclude religion.” This is the view that says we should completely exclude religion from government and politics. According to this view, religious beliefs should never be mentioned in governmental functions or on government property and should never play a role in decision-making processes in politics or government.

This is the view promoted today by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). According to it, religious belief should be kept at home and quiet. There should be no influence from religious groups in the political process.

Examples of this view are seen when people object to prayers being given at the beginning of a city council meeting, or when groups demand that the Ten Commandments be removed from public places. Supporters of this view seek to prohibit religious expression in high schools, student-led Bible studies, prayers before sporting

events, or even a valedictorian talking about his or her faith at graduation.

1. It changes freedom of religion into freedom from religion

The “exclude religion” stance is wrong from a constitutional viewpoint, because it twists the positive ideal of “freedom of religion” to mean “freedom from all religious influence”—which is entirely different and something the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the U.S. Constitution never intended.

In fact, the “exclude religion from politics” view would invalidate the very reasoning of the Declaration of Independence, on which the United States of America was first founded. The first two sentences mention God twice in order to say that God’s laws authorize independence from Great Britain and that God is the one who gives human beings the rights that governments must protect:

*When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature **and of Nature’s God** entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are **endowed by their Creator** with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men....*

In other words, the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that both the laws of nature and of God gave our country the right to become an independent nation. They claimed *divine authorization* for the very existence of the United States of America! Furthermore, the signers said that the purpose of government is to protect the rights that are given to people by God (“endowed by their Creator”).

This is hardly “excluding religion” from government or important government publications.

The First Amendment to the Constitution likewise declared: “Congress shall make no law *respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*; or abridging the freedom of speech.” What they meant by “an establishment of religion” was an established state church, a government-sponsored or government-endorsed denomination or specific religion. But they did not intend this amendment to exclude all religious speech and activity from government buildings and activities, for our nation’s early political leaders continued praying publicly to God at government events, even having church services in the Capitol for many years.

The phrase “separation of church and state” does not occur anywhere in the Constitution. It was first seen in a letter from Thomas Jefferson in 1802, in which he assured some Baptists in Connecticut (the Danbury Baptists) that the government would never interfere with the affairs of their church. The First Amendment was never intended to guarantee that government should be free from religion or religious influence. The only “freedom of religion” that was intended was freedom from government sponsorship of one particular religion or denomination.

2. It wrongly restricts freedom of religion and freedom of speech

The First Amendment also excluded any law “prohibiting the free exercise” of religion. This is directly opposed to the “exclude religion from government” view, which actually seeks to *prohibit* Christians and Jews and others from exercising their religious freedom when speaking or giving a prayer at a public event. Their free exercise of religion is taken away from them.

This view also wrongly restricts individual freedom of speech. Why should a high school valedictorian not be free to express her own viewpoint in her graduation speech? *Speaking* a religious opinion in public is not *compelling* people to accept that viewpoint.

3. *It was never adopted by the American people*

The “exclude religion” view was never adopted by the American people through any democratic process, but it is being imposed on our nation by the exercise of “raw judicial power” by our courts, and especially by the Supreme Court. This has been an increasing problem for the last several decades in America.

The Supreme Court decision *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) was especially significant. In that case the court said that government actions “must not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion.” It did not say “advancing or inhibiting *one particular religion*” but “religion” in general. (An earlier decision in 1947, *Everson v. Board of Education*, had said something similar.) This kind of “exclude religion” view was never adopted or approved by the American people but simply decreed by our Supreme Court, taking to itself powers it never legitimately had.

4. *It removes from government God’s teaching about good and evil*

The Bible says that a government official is “God’s servant for your good” (Rom. 13:4), but how can government officials effectively serve God if no one is allowed to tell them what they believe God expects of them? The Bible says that government officials are sent “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:14), but how can they do that if no spokesmen from any of the world’s religions are allowed to give them counsel on what is “good” and what is “evil”?

Such a viewpoint has to assume that there is no God, or if there is, his moral standards can’t be known. And by rejecting the idea of absolute moral standards that come from God, this viewpoint leads toward the moral disintegration of a society.

We see the payoff of this view in the rampant moral relativism among today’s young adults who were taught as children in “exclude religion” schools, schools where “because God says so” could no longer be used as the strong foundation for moral conduct as it had been for the first 200 years of this nation.

Wrong View #3: All Government Is Evil and Demonic

According to this third view, all use of government power is deeply infected by evil, demonic forces. The realm of government power is the realm of Satan and his forces, and therefore all governmental use of “power over” someone is worldly and not the way of life that Jesus taught.

Support from Luke 4:6

This viewpoint has been strongly promoted by Minnesota pastor Greg Boyd in his influential book *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Boyd’s views in this book have had a large impact in the United States, especially on younger evangelical voters.²

Boyd says that all civil government is “demonic” (p. 21). His primary evidence is Satan’s statement to Jesus in Luke 4:

*And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, **for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours**” (Luke 4:5–7).*

Boyd emphasizes Satan’s claim that all the authority of all the kingdoms of the world “has been delivered to me” and then says that Jesus “doesn’t dispute the Devil’s claim to own them. Apparently, the authority of all the kingdoms of the world has been given to Satan.”

Boyd goes on to say, “Functionally, Satan is the acting CEO of all earthly governments” (p. 22). This is indeed a thoroughgoing claim.

The mistake of depending on Luke 4:6

Greg Boyd is clearly wrong at this point. Jesus tells us how to evaluate Satan’s claims, for he says, “When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Jesus didn’t need to respond to *every* false word

Satan said, for his purpose was to resist the temptation itself, and this he did with the decisive words, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve’” (Luke 4:8).

And so we have a choice: Do we believe *Satan’s words* that he has the authority of all earthly kingdoms, or do we believe *Jesus’ words* that Satan is a liar and the father of lies? The answer is easy: Satan wanted Jesus to believe a lie, just as he wanted Eve to believe a lie (Gen. 3:4), and he wants us to believe a lie as well, that he is the ruler of earthly governments.

By contrast, there are verses in the Bible that tell us how we should think of civil governments. These verses do not agree with Satan’s claim in Luke 4:6 or with Boyd’s claim about Satan’s authority over all earthly governments. Rather, these verses where God is speaking (not Satan) portray civil government as a gift from God, something that is subject to God’s rule and used by God for his purposes. Here are some of those passages:

The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men (Dan. 4:17).

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. . . . 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, for he is God’s servant for your good . . . the authorities are the ministers of God (Rom. 13:1-6).

The Apostle Peter sees civil government as doing the *opposite* of what Satan does: civil governments are established by God “to *punish* those who do evil,” but Satan *encourages* those who do evil! Civil governments are established by God “to *praise* those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:14), but Satan *discourages and attacks* those who do good.

The point is that Satan wants us to believe that all civil government is under his control, but that is not taught anywhere in the Bible. The only verse

in the whole Bible that says Satan has authority over all governments is spoken by the father of lies, and we should not believe it. Greg Boyd is simply wrong in his defense of the view that “government is demonic.”

Wrong View #4: Do Evangelism, Not Politics

A fourth wrong view about Christians and politics is promoted by evangelicals who essentially say, “We should just preach the Gospel, and that is the only way Christians can hope to change peoples’ hearts and change our society.” I call this the “do evangelism, not politics” view. It claims that the church is only called to “preach the Gospel,” not to preach about politics.

God calls Christians to do good works

Of course, we must insist that people can never earn their salvation by doing good works. The Bible insists that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and it also says, “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20).

But after people have trusted in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins, then what should they do? How should we live now as Christians? The Bible says we should be doing “good works.” In fact, right in the place where Paul writes a magnificent proclamation of justification by faith alone, he adds an important sentence about good works. First he says,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:9).

Then he immediately adds,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

In another place he says, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Certainly that means that we should do

good to others, as we have opportunity, by being a good influence on laws and government and by having a good influence on the political process.

Jesus left us here on earth in part because he wants to allow our lives to give glory to him in the midst of a fallen and sinful world: “Let your light shine before others, *so that they may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

If a pastor teaches his people how to raise their children, that’s “good works.” If he teaches them how to have good marriages, that’s “good works.” If he teaches them to love their neighbors as themselves (Matt. 22:39), that’s “good works.”

Should churches teach their people how to do “good works” in families, in hospitals and in schools, and in businesses and in neighborhoods, but not in government? Why should that area of life be excluded from the influence of the “good works” of believers that will “give glory to your Father who is in heaven”?

Influencing government for good is a way to love our neighbors

Jesus’ command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39) means that I should seek good laws that will protect preborn children. It means that I should seek good laws that protect marriages and families. It means I should seek good laws that protect children from corrupting moral influences that want to use classrooms to teach that all kinds of sexual experimentation outside of marriage are fine and that there is nothing wrong with pornography.

In short, Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor” means that I should seek the good of my neighbors in every aspect of society, *including government*, by seeking to bring about good government and good laws.

Obeying what God tells us is doing spiritual good because it glorifies God

I cannot agree with people who say that Christian political involvement will do “no spiritual

good.” If it is commanded in the Bible and it’s what God tells us to do, then by definition it *is* doing spiritual good. “This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3)—therefore, following his teachings regarding government is one way of showing love to him.

In addition, when Christian influence brings about good laws that do good for society, we should expect that some people will realize how good God’s moral standards are and they will glorify God as a result. People will “see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Even in the Old Testament, Moses told the people of Israel:

[The other nations] when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut. 4:6).

Good and bad governments make a huge difference in people’s lives, and in the church

When people say that the kind of government we have doesn’t make any difference to the church or to the spiritual lives of Christians, I think of the difference between North Korea and South Korea. These countries have the same language, the same ethnic background, the same cultural history, and live in the same location of the world. The only difference between them is that South Korea is a robust, thriving democracy with free people and North Korea is a Communist country with the most repressive, totalitarian government in the world.

And what a difference that makes in people’s lives. There is just a handful of Christians in North Korea, and they must exercise their faith in secret. Severe, persistent persecution has hindered the church so greatly that there is no missionary activity, no public worship, and no publication of Christian literature. Millions of North Koreans are born, live, and die without ever hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By contrast, the church in South Korea, where the government has allowed freedom of religion, is growing, thriving, and sending missionaries around the world. It has one of the highest percentages of evangelical

Christians of any nation (around 25%).

What is the only difference? The kind of government they have. One country is free and one is totalitarian. And in between these extremes fall many other nations of the world, governments more or less free and more or less conformed to God's principles for government as taught in Scripture. Where God's principles are followed more fully and people are allowed more freedom, the church will often thrive and people's lives are better in hundreds of ways.

Governments do make a difference to the church and to the work of God's kingdom. This is why Paul urged that prayers be made "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim. 2:2). Good governments help people to live a "peaceful" and "godly" life, and bad governments hinder that goal.

Governments can allow churches to meet freely and evangelize or they can prevent these things by force of law (as in Saudi Arabia and North Korea). They can hinder or promote literacy (the latter enabling people to read a Bible). They can stop murderers and thieves and drunk drivers and child predators or allow them to terrorize society and destroy lives. They can promote and protect marriages or hinder and even destroy them. Governments do make a significant difference for the work of God in the world, and we are to pray and work for good governments around the world.

Christians have influenced governments positively throughout history

Historian Alvin Schmidt points out how the spread of Christianity and Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374);³ outlawing the brutal battles-to-the-death in which thousands of gladiators had died (in 404);⁴ granting of property rights and other protections to women;⁵ banning polygamy (which is still practiced in some Muslim nations today);⁶ prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India

(in 1829);⁷ outlawing the painful and crippling practice of binding young women's feet in China (in 1912);⁸ persuading government officials to begin a system of public schools in Germany (in the sixteenth century);⁹ and advancing the idea of compulsory education of all children in a number of European countries.¹⁰

During the history of the church, Christians had a decisive influence in opposing and often abolishing slavery in the Roman Empire, in Ireland, and in most of Europe (though Schmidt frankly notes that a minority of "erring" Christian teachers have supported slavery in various centuries).¹¹ In England, William Wilberforce, a devout Christian, led the successful effort to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself throughout the British Empire by 1840.¹²

In the United States, though there were vocal defenders of slavery among Christians in the South, they lost the argument, and they were vastly outnumbered by the many Christians who were ardent abolitionists, speaking, writing, and agitating constantly for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Schmidt notes that two-thirds of the American abolitionists in the mid-1830s were Christian clergymen who were preaching "politics" from the pulpit, saying that slavery should be abolished.¹³

The American civil rights movement that resulted in the outlawing of racial segregation and discrimination was led by Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor, and supported by many Christian churches and groups.¹⁴

There was also strong influence from Christian ideas and influential Christians in the formulation of the Magna Charta in England (1215)¹⁵ and of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1787)¹⁶ in the United States. These are three of the most significant documents in the history of governments on earth, and all three show the marks of significant Christian influence in the foundational ideas of how governments should function. These foundations for British and American government did not come about as a result of the "do evange-

lism, not politics” view.

Schmidt also argues that several specific components of modern views of government had strong Christian influence in their origin and influence, such as individual human rights, individual freedom, the equality of individuals before the law, freedom of religion, and separation of church and state.¹⁷

As for the present time, Charles Colson’s insightful book *God and Government*¹⁸ (previously published as *Kingdoms in Conflict*) reports dozens of encouraging narratives of courageous, real-life Christians who in recent years, in causes large and small, have had significant impact for good on laws and governments around the world.

When I look over that list of changes in governments and laws that Christians incited, I think God *did* call the church and thousands of Christians within the church to work to bring about these momentous improvements in human society throughout the world. Or should we say that Christians who brought about these changes were *not* doing so out of obedience to God? That these changes made *no difference* to God? This cannot be true.

I believe those changes listed above were important to the God who declares, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). God *cares* how people treat one another here on earth, and these changes in government listed above *do* have eternal value in God’s sight.

If the Christian church had adopted the “do evangelism, not politics” view throughout its history, it would never have brought about these immeasurably valuable changes among the nations of the world. But these changes did happen, because Christians realized that if they could influence laws and governments for good, they would be obeying the command of their Lord, “Let your light shine before others, so that they *may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). They influenced governments for good because they knew that “we are

his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Doesn’t the Bible say that persecution is coming?

Sometimes people ask me, “Why should we try to improve governments when the Bible tells us that persecution is coming in the end times before Christ returns? Doesn’t that mean that we should expect governments to become more and more anti-Christian?” (They have in mind passages like Matt. 24:9–12, 21–22; 2 Tim. 3:1–5.)

The answer is that we do not know if Christ will return next year or 500 years from now. What we do know is that while we have opportunity, God tells us not to give up but to go on preaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and doing “good works” (Eph. 2:10) and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). That means we should go on trying to influence governments for good as long as we are able to do so.

If all the Christians who influenced governments for good in previous centuries had given up and said, “persecution is coming and governments will become more evil, so there is nothing we can do,” then none of those good changes in laws would have come about. Instead of giving in to such a hopeless attitude, courageous Christians in previous generations sought to do good for others and for governments, and God often blessed their efforts.

But won’t political involvement distract us from the main task of preaching the Gospel?

At this point someone may object that while political involvement may have *some* benefits and may do *some* good, it can so easily distract us, turn us away from the church, and cause us to neglect the main task of pointing people toward personal trust in Christ.

Yet the proper question is not, “Does political influence take resources away from evangelism?” but, “Is political influence something God has called us to do?” If God has called some of us

to some political influence, then those resources would not be blessed if we diverted them to evangelism—or to the music ministry, or to teaching Sunday School to children, or to any other use.

In this matter, as in everything else the church does, it would be healthy for Christians to realize that God may call *individual Christians* to different emphases in their lives. This is because God has placed in the church “varieties of gifts” (1 Cor. 12:4) and the church is an entity that has “many members” but is still “one body” (v. 12).

Therefore God might call someone to devote almost all of his or her time to the music ministry, someone else to youth work, someone else to evangelism, someone else to preparing refreshments to welcome visitors, and someone else to work with lighting and sound systems. “But if Jim places all his attention on the sound system, won’t that distract the church from the main task of preaching the Gospel?” No, not at all. That is not what God has called Jim to emphasize (though he will certainly share the Gospel with others as he has opportunity). Jim’s exclusive focus on the church’s sound system means he is just being a faithful steward in the responsibility God has given him.

I think it is entirely possible that God called Billy Graham to emphasize evangelism and say nothing about politics and also called James Dobson to emphasize a radio ministry to families and to influencing the political world for good. Aren’t there enough Christians in the world for us to focus on more than one task? And does God not call us to thousands of different emphases, all in obedience to him?

The whole ministry of the church will include many emphases. And the teaching ministry from the pulpit should do nothing less than proclaim “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). It should teach, over the course of time, on all areas of life and all areas of Bible knowledge. That certainly must include, to some extent, what the Bible says about the purposes of civil government and how that should apply to our situations today.

Wrong View #5: Do Politics, Not Evangelism

The fifth view says that the church should just try to change the laws and the culture and should not emphasize evangelism. I do not know of any responsible evangelical leaders or prominent Christian groups today who hold this view or say that Christians should just “do politics, not evangelism.”

But this was a primary emphasis of the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with its campaigns to get the church to work aggressively to overcome poverty, slums, crime, racial discrimination, and other social evils. These were good causes in themselves, but this movement placed little if any emphasis on the need for individuals to place personal trust in Christ as Savior or the need to proclaim the entire Bible as the Word of God and worthy of our belief. The Social Gospel movement gained followers primarily among liberal Protestants rather than among more conservative, evangelical Protestant groups.

Christians who encourage greater Christian involvement in politics today need to hear an important word of caution: If we (and I include myself here) ever begin to think that *good laws alone* will solve a nation’s problems or bring about a righteous and just society, we will have made a huge mistake. Unless there is simultaneously an inner change in people’s hearts and minds, good laws alone will only bring about grudging, external compliance with the minimum level of obedience necessary to avoid punishment. Good government and good laws can prevent much evil behavior, and they can teach people and show what society approves, but they cannot by themselves produce good people.

Genuine, long-term change in a nation will only happen (1) if people’s *hearts* change so that they seek to do good, not evil; (2) if people’s *minds* change so that their moral convictions align more closely with God’s moral standards in the Bible; and (3) if a nation’s *laws* change so that they

more fully encourage good conduct and punish wrong conduct. Item 1 comes about through personal evangelism and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Item 2 takes place both through personal conversation and teaching and through public discussion and debate. Item 3 comes about through Christian political involvement. All three are necessary.

This “do politics, not evangelism” view is certainly wrong. The church must above all proclaim that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). People definitely experience a change in their hearts when they believe in Christ: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

What then? Is there a correct view that is different from these five wrong views? The view I propose next is significant Christian influence on government. Significant Christian influence on government is not *compulsion* (view 1), it is not *silence* (view 2), and it is not *dropping out of the process* (views 3 and 4), nor is it *thinking the government can save people* (view 5). It is different from each of these wrong views, and I think it is much closer to the actual teaching of the Bible.

A Better View: Significant Christian Influence on Government

The “significant influence” view says that Christians *should* seek to influence civil government according to God’s moral standards and God’s purposes for government as revealed in the Bible (when rightly understood). But while Christians exercise this influence, they must simultaneously insist on protecting freedom of religion for all citizens.

Old Testament Support for Significant Christian Influence

The Bible shows several examples of believers in God who influenced secular governments. For instance, the Jewish prophet Daniel exercised a

strong influence on the secular government in Babylon. Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar,

Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: *break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed*, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity. (Dan. 4:27)

Daniel’s approach is bold and clear. It is the opposite of a modern multicultural approach that might say something like this:

O King Nebuchadnezzar, I am a Jewish prophet, but I would not presume to impose my Jewish moral standards on your Babylonian kingdom. Ask your astronomers and your soothsayers! They will guide you in your own traditions. Then follow your own heart! It would not be my place to speak to you about right and wrong.

No, Daniel boldly told the king, “*Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed.*”

At that time Daniel was a high official in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. He was “ruler over the whole province of Babylon” and “chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48). He was regularly “at the king’s court” (v. 49). Therefore it seems that Daniel had a significant advisory role to the king. This leads to a reasonable assumption that, though it is not specified in the text, Daniel’s summary statement about “sins” and “iniquities” and “showing mercy to the oppressed” (Dan. 4:27), was followed by a longer conversation in which Daniel named specific policies and actions of the king that were either good or evil in the eyes of God.

The counsel that Jeremiah proclaimed to the Jewish exiles in Babylon also supports the idea of believers having influence on laws and government. Jeremiah told these exiles, “*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*” (Jer. 29:7). But if believers are to seek to bring good to such a pagan society, that must include seeking to bring good to its government (as Daniel did). The true “welfare” of such a

city will be advanced through governmental laws and policies that are consistent with God's teaching in the Bible, not by those that are contrary to the Bible's teachings.

Other believers in God also had high positions of governmental influence in non-Jewish nations. Joseph was the highest official after Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and had great influence in the decisions of Pharaoh (see Gen. 41:37–45; 42:6; 45:8–9, 26).

Later, Moses boldly stood before the Pharaoh and demanded freedom for the people of Israel, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Let my people go'" (Exod. 8:1). Nehemiah was "cupbearer to the king" (Neh. 1:11), a position of high responsibility before King Artaxerxes of Persia.¹⁹ Mordecai "was second in rank to King Ahasuerus" of Persia (Esth. 10:3; see also 9:4). Queen Esther also had significant influence on the decisions of Ahasuerus (see Esth. 5:1–8; 7:1–6; 8:3–13; 9:12–15, 29–32).

In addition, there are several passages in the Old Testament prophets that address the sins of foreign nations around Israel: see Isaiah 13–23; Ezekiel 25–32; Amos 1–2; Obadiah (addressed to Edom); Jonah (sent to Nineveh); Nahum (addressed to Nineveh); Habakkuk 2; Zephaniah 2. These prophets could speak to nations outside of Israel because the God who is revealed in the Bible is the God of all peoples and all nations of the earth.

Therefore the moral standards of God as revealed in the Bible are the moral standards to which God will hold all people accountable. This includes more than the way people conduct themselves in their marriages and families, in their neighborhoods and schools, and in their jobs and businesses. It also concerns the way people conduct themselves in government offices. Believers have a responsibility to bear witness to the moral standards of the Bible by which God will hold all people accountable, including those people in public office.

New Testament Support for Significant Christian Influence

A New Testament example of influence on government is found in the life of John the Baptist. During his lifetime the ruler of Galilee (from 4 BC to AD 39) was Herod Antipas, a "tetrarch" who had been appointed by the Roman emperor and was subject to the authority of the Roman Empire. Matthew's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist rebuked Herod for a specific personal sin in his life:

For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matt. 14:3–4).

But Luke's Gospel adds more detail:

[John the Baptist] preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, *and for all the evil things that Herod had done*, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison (Luke 3:18–20).

Certainly "all the evil things that Herod had done" included evil actions that he had carried out as a governing official in the Roman Empire. John the Baptist rebuked him for all of them. He boldly spoke to officials of the empire about the moral right and wrong of their governmental policies. In doing this, John was following in the steps of Daniel and many Old Testament prophets. The New Testament portrays John the Baptist's actions as those of "a righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20). He is an excellent example of a believer who had what I call "significant influence" on the policies of a government (though it cost him his life: see Mark 6:21–29).

Another example is the apostle Paul. While Paul was in prison in Caesarea, he stood trial before the Roman governor Felix. Here is what happened:

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you" (Acts 24:24–25).

While Luke does not give us any more details, the fact that Felix was “alarmed” and that Paul reasoned with him about “righteousness” and “the coming judgment” indicates that Paul was talking about moral standards of right and wrong and the ways in which Felix, as an official of the Roman Empire, had obligations to live up to the standards that are given by God. Paul no doubt told Felix that he would be accountable for his actions at “the coming judgment” and that this was what led Felix to be “alarmed.” When Luke tells us that Paul “reasoned” with Felix about these things, the word (Greek *dialegomai*) indicates a back-and-forth conversation or discussion. It is not difficult to suppose that Felix asked Paul, “What about this decision that I made? What about this policy? What about this ruling?” It would be an artificial restriction on the meaning of the text to suppose that Paul *only* spoke with Felix about his “private” life and not about his actions as a Roman governor. Paul is thus another example of attempting to exercise “significant Christian influence” on civil government.

Clearly, examples of godly believers’ influence on governments are not minor or confined to obscure portions of the Bible, but are found in Old Testament history from Genesis all the way to Esther (the last historical book), in the canonical writing prophets from Isaiah to Zephaniah, and in the New Testament in both the Gospels and Acts. And those are just the examples of God’s servants bringing “significant influence” to pagan kings who gave no allegiance to the God of Israel or to Jesus in the New Testament times. If we add to this list the many stories of Old Testament prophets bringing counsel and encouragement and rebuke to the good and evil kings of Israel as well, then we would include the histories of all the kings and the writings of all the prophets—

nearly every book of the Old Testament. And we could add in several passages from Psalms and Proverbs that speak of good and evil rulers. Influencing government for good on the basis of the wisdom found in God’s own words is a theme that runs through the entire Bible.

Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2

In addition to these examples, specific Bible passages that teach about government present an argument for “significant Christian influence.” Why do we think God put Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–14 and other related passages (as in Psalms and Proverbs) in the Bible? Are they in the Bible simply as a matter of intellectual curiosity for Christians who will read them privately but never use them to speak to government officials about how God understands their roles and responsibilities? Does God intend this material to be concealed from people in government and kept secret by Christians who read it and silently moan about “how far government has strayed from what God wants it to be”?

Certainly God put such passages there not only to inform Christians about how they should relate to civil government, but also in order that people with governmental responsibilities could know what God himself expects from them. This also pertains to other passages in the Bible that instruct us about God’s moral standards, about the nature and purpose of human beings made in God’s image, about God’s purposes for the earth, and about principles concerning good and bad governments. All of these teachings are relevant for those who serve in governmental office, and we should speak and teach about them when we have opportunity to do so.

The Responsibility of Citizens in a Democracy to Understand the Bible’s Teaching

There is still another argument for “significant Christian influence” on government that applies to anyone who lives in a democracy, because in a democracy a significant portion of the ruling

power of government is entrusted to the citizens generally, through the ballot box. Therefore all citizens who are old enough to vote have a responsibility before God to know what God expects of civil government and what kind of moral and legal standards he wants government to follow. But how can citizens learn what kind of government God is seeking? They can learn this only if churches teach about government and politics from the Bible.

I realize that pastors will differ in the degree of detail they wish to teach with regard to specific political issues facing a nation (for example, whether to teach about issues such as abortion, euthanasia, care for the poor, the military and national defense, use and care of the environment, or the nature of marriage). But surely it is a responsibility of pastors to teach on *some* of these specific policies in ways that go beyond the mere statement, “You have a responsibility to vote intelligently.”

After all, who else is going to teach these Christians about *exactly how* the Bible applies to specific political issues? Would pastors think it right to leave their congregations with such vague guidance in other areas of life? Would we say, “You have a responsibility to bring up your children according to Christian principles,” and then never explain to them what those Christian principles are? Would we think it right to say to people in the business world, “You have a responsibility to work in the business world according to Christian principles,” and then never give them any details about what these Christian principles are? No, the responsibility of pastors is to give wise biblical teaching, explaining exactly how the teachings of the Bible apply to various specific situations in life, and that should certainly include instruction about some policy matters in government and politics.

Final Thoughts

There is a view among a few Christians in the United States today called “theonomy.” Theonomists argue that the Old Testament laws that God gave to Israel in the Mosaic covenant

should be the pattern for civil laws in nations today. This would include carrying out the death penalty for such things as blasphemy or adultery or homosexual conduct.

The error of theonomists is that they misunderstand the unique place that these laws for Israel had in the history of the whole Bible, and they misunderstand the New Testament teaching of the distinction between the realm of the church and the realm of the state that Jesus established when he said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21).

Furthermore, when I speak about “significant Christian influence” on government, I want to be very clear that I do not mean that Christians should only vote for other Christian candidates for office, or even that Christians should generally prefer an evangelical candidate over others who are running. The relevant principle is this: Christians should support candidates who best represent moral and political values consistent with biblical teaching, no matter their religious background or convictions.

Two concluding observations: First, without Christian influence, governments will have no clear moral compass, and second, Christian citizens have an obligation to exercise such influence.

Without Christian Influence, Governments Will Have No Clear Moral Compass

Try to imagine what a nation and its government would be like if all Christian influence on government were suddenly removed. Within a few years no one would have any moral absolutes beyond their individual moral sentiments and moral intuitions, which can be so unreliable. In addition, most people would have no moral authority beyond that of individual human opinion. Therefore, how could a nation find any moral guidance?

Consider the many political issues facing the United States (and other nations) that have sig-

nificant moral components to them. For example: war, same-sex marriage, abortion, pornography, poverty, care for the environment, capital punishment, and public education. There are many other issues as well. The United States has a tremendous need for moral guidance, and I am convinced that Christians should study and discuss and then speak publicly about them.

If pastors and church members say, “I’ll let somebody else speak about that,” where will the nation’s moral standards come from? Where will people learn about ethics? Perhaps from Hollywood movies? From friends at work or at the local bar? From professional counselors? From elementary school teachers? But where do *these* people learn about right and wrong?

The simple fact is that if Christians do not speak publicly about what the Bible teaches regarding issues of right and wrong, there aren’t many other good sources for finding any transcendent source of ethics, any source outside of ourselves and our own subjective feelings and consciences.

As Christians, we need to remember that the entire world is locked in a tremendous spiritual battle. There are demonic forces, forces of Satan, that seek to oppose God’s purposes and bring evil and destruction to every human being that God created in his own image, and also bring destruction to every human society and every nation. If pastors and church members say, “I’m going to be silent about the moral and ethical issues that we face as a nation,” that will leave a moral vacuum, and it will not be long until the ultimate adversaries of the Gospel—Satan and his demons—will rush in and influence every decision in a way contrary to biblical standards.

The Political Obligations of All Christian Citizens

I believe that every Christian citizen who lives in a democracy has at the very least a minimal obligation to be well-informed and to vote for candidates and policies that are most consistent with biblical principles. The opportunity to help select the kind of government we will have is

a stewardship that God entrusts to citizens in a democracy, a stewardship that we should not neglect or fail to appreciate.

Furthermore, I want to ask every Christian in the United States to consider whether he or she has a higher obligation than merely voting. The question is whether someone thinks it is morally right to receive great benefits from a nation but to give almost nothing in return. The great freedoms that citizens have in the United States came only as a result of great sacrifice on the part of millions of others. The original signers of the Declaration of Independence knew that they were publicly declaring themselves to be guilty of treason against Britain, and they knew they would be subject to the death penalty and to confiscation of their property if the British caught them or defeated them.²⁰ Nor could they have any great confidence that they would win a war against the most powerful nation on earth at that time. Therefore the last line in the Declaration of Independence says this:

And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.²¹

Independence from Britain did not come cheaply. In the War of Independence, approximately 4,500 Americans died. Later wars were even more costly. All told, hundreds of thousands of men (and many women as well) *sacrificed their lives* to protect the nation and preserve the freedoms we enjoy today. Is it right that we simply enjoy these freedoms while giving back to our nation nothing in return? Should we not participate at least at some level in giving money or giving time to support specific candidates and issues? Or writing letters or helping to distribute literature? Or even running for office or volunteering to serve in the military? Is it not right that all of us at least do something more than merely voting to preserve and protect this nation?

Endnotes

- 1 This booklet is adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Politics – According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), and is used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.
- 2 For example, echoes of Boyd’s writing can be seen at various places in Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
- 3 Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004; formerly published as *Under the Influence*, 2001), 51, 53, 59.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 116–17.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 179–80. Although this is not a matter of merely influencing laws, Schmidt also points out the immense influence of Christians on higher education: By the year 1932 there were 182 colleges and universities in the United States, and of that number, 92 percent had been founded by Christian denominations (p. 190).
- 11 *Ibid.*, 274–76.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 276–78.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 279.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 287–89.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 251–52.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 253–58.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 258–70.
- 18 Charles W. Colson, *God and Government: An Insider’s View on the Boundaries between Faith and Politics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
- 19 “The position of cupbearer to the king was a high office and involved regular access to the king,” *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 825.
- 20 Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 59, 118, 125, 147, 152.
- 21 Declaration of Independence, adopted July 4, 1776. www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/characters/declaration_transcript.html.

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