

The Church & Politics

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You do not have to look very far to see and experience the tension of having multiple allegiances. For example, if you are an avid runner and part of the *communitas* run club, a member of the local prison ministry team, and a volunteer at the local Soup Kitchen, then you will know that when multiple events happen on the same day, at the same time, you may experience an arousal of uneasiness, mostly likely risen from a commitment to keep your word and honor your commitments while knowing it is not feasible. Similarly, there resides, or should reside, in every Christian a tension that partially remains obscure of how to interact with culture, specifically when it comes to civic duties. In order to better understand the tension of how people live their lives and raise their families in the kingdom of this world, which for Americans is found in a democratic run government, and also be part of and live in the kingdom of God, we must understand the context of the grand storyline of the Bible. The Bible is metanarrative of how the Creator, God, made an ordered and flourishing world. He placed image bearing humans to reflect His love, truth, and reign as viceregents of the land as they live in relational oneness with God, receiving their very life, wisdom, and knowledge from Him. But humanity quickly abandoned God's plan for their own, breaking their union with God and began defining life on their own terms and in their own wisdom. Consequently, they introduced a system on earth of power at the expense of others, anger, pain, and suffering; life contrary to God's rule and union with humanity.

God immediately began making a way to restore humanity back into His presence and relational oneness where they would once again bear His image as true reflection of Him. But the bondage of death, evil, and destruction was too great for any human to overcome. At the climax of the story, God became human through the man of Jesus and defeated death, not in the manner that the world conquers, the sword, which represents "power over" others, but rather, by a self-

sacrificial, “power under”, others serving, Calvary kind of love that wound up getting Him murdered on a tree. Through Jesus’ death, He paradoxically proved victorious over the evils of this world as He rose to life, defeating death itself. Because the victory is found only in Jesus, all who claim faith and allegiance in Him share in His victory and freedom.

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection not only returned God’s dwelling presence with His people, but it inaugurated the return of God’s kingdom and complete restoration of His creation, where Jesus reigns as the King. Although God’s people have been spiritually redeemed as members of His kingdom, we still live in a broken, disordered, and hell filled world under the rule and reign of another, a usurper. Jesus promised that one day He would return and completely renew the broken world, making it more complete than it was in the beginning. He will cast out those who did not put their allegiance in Him, including this usurper, never to effect God’s creation ever again. Today, the Church, finds itself in the stage of the story known as the “already, not yet.” While we await the new heavens and new earth, we live as foreigners and aliens in this world as we put our allegiance in God’s inaugurated, but not yet fully realized kingdom, where we live as active participants and citizens.

The New Testament letters help identify what it practically looks like for His people to live and interact within these two kingdoms. The Apostle Paul reveals that the “[government, kingdom of this world] is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:4). Before going any further, it is important to recognize that Paul is not saying that all authorities are good. There are evil ones that are so corrupt and hellish that they are what the Apostle John would call the “antichrist”. What Paul is saying is that in a broken, fallen world, the people need a kingdom to carry out law and order. In

fact, God deems it a good thing. But just because it is a good thing does not mean it is the Way of Jesus. For example, a Christian police officer, carrying out the law and rule of the land that people must submit to, may have to save a life by shooting someone who is doing a horrendous crime, and it is deemed a good deed. But that does not mean he is doing a Christian thing.

The kingdom of this world, i.e. government, functions in a very different way than the kingdom of God. In fact, the kingdom of the world operates with a “power over” others mentality. Remember, all kingdoms of the world, to some degree, are owned and operated by Satan, the very forces of evil that Jesus conquered (Luke 4:5-7; 1 John 5:19; Eph 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4). In so far as governments carry out justice, law and order, they can rule in a good way, but that should not be confused with how followers of Jesus are to operate in God’s kingdom. This raises a very important question, *How are we, as followers of Jesus, to engage in culture and the institutions of the kingdom of this world?*

Throughout church history, there have been at least five takes on what this way of living has looked like. Some have gravitated toward the triumphant view. They believe that the gospel will prevail, and the world will be Christianized. The central goal of the triumphant view is to gain and maintain power of the church over the government. A great example of this is seen in the fourth century rule of Constantine. In 313 AD, the Roman government legalized Christianity, and in 381 AD, Christianity became the official religion of the empire. While the triumphant view admirably holds Christ (in principle) as the victorious king, Jesus refused to use this model in his ministry. For the early Constantinian Christians, when the emperor chose their side and gave their religion power and an “in”, they forced their “good” piety on others. In 382 AD, the Church killed its first non-Christian.¹ What followed over the centuries were Christians who

¹ Gregory Boyd. “Taking America Back for God?” Presented at the Woodland Hills Church, 2004.

followed the kingdom of the world and the use of sword, partaking in barbaric behavior and mass genocides of unbelievers such as Muslims and Jews, all in the name of Jesus.

A second view is the transformational model. Those who follow this model believe that the best way for Christians to integrate into culture is to win governmental power in order to run a Christian government and make a Christian society. Robert George, Director of James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, takes a strong stance on this view, advocating that American needs to return to its governmental, Judea-Christian roots that founded America.² On the contrary, author and pastor, Greg Boyd, strongly disagrees that America was founded as a Christian nation. In his book, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, Boyd shows that if one can rationalize the colonization and annihilation of millions of Native Americans, barbaric exporting and decimation of millions of Africans, and the slaughter of millions of Muslims, Japanese, and Iraqi's through the centuries, they still have to hurdle the fact that the founding, deistic fathers, envisioned a people civil and obedient to law, not completely transformed into Kingdom people through relationship with Jesus.³

While the transformational view commendably takes to heart the Christian call to transform this world, Jesus never used this model, in part, because passing certain laws and forcing people to obey them does not make anyone a Christian, even if the laws are highly moral and ethical. On the other end of the spectrum is the lifeboat model, where people believe that only Jesus can change society, and that won't happen until His return. The central goal is to save people from the world, under Satan's domain, and bring them into the church, so as not to interact with culture. A group who exhibits this model are the Amish people, as outlined in Rod

² Josh Chatraw and Karen Swallow Prior, *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 223.

³ Gregory A Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Zondervan, 2009).

Deher book, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christian in a Post-Christian Nation*.⁴ While those who follow this model recognize Jesus' radically different way of operating, the retreat mentality does not accurately portray God's desire for humans, who He called and purposed to bear His image, advance creation, and live as vital participants of the unification of heaven and earth.

The last two viewpoints share key similarities and lie more in the center of the models previously stated. One is the ambivalent viewpoint that believes if the proclamation of the gospel results in a revival, society will improve as a secondary effect. Billy Graham led the charge for this conviction, and while it remarkably takes seriously the call to live as witnesses in the present age, it still misses the mark thinking that a spiritually improved society, is the aim of God's kingdom. But God does not want more piety for piety's sake, but that people actually experience the life regenerating, Spirit indwelling, transformed life that can only come through a relationship with Jesus. This leads to the last model, the prophetic model, which I believe gets closest to the heart of the Father. The prophetic viewpoint believes that as it proclaims the gospel and seeks to win people to Christ, the Church proclaims righteousness in the culture by deed and words, thus exposing the evils through the context of grace. It seems like this model represents Jesus the best.

The way Jesus lived was a commentary in of itself of God's kingdom to society. He shined such a bright light on the injustices of society by living and giving His righteousness through words and deeds to those He interacted with. A great example of this is seen in John's Gospel as Jesus interacted with a Samaritan women at a well. Jesus offered living water, His redeeming life, to her despite pointing out her sins regarding marriage. What John is showing us

⁴ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

is that Jesus, knowing all she had done, still offered her Water of Life. He is essentially saying, “I know how you are living, and I am still choosing to give you life everlasting.” Her need, as all humans, is not another behavior change for moralities sake, but rather, an internal transformation that only comes from having seen, tasted, and experienced True Life, Jesus. In other words, one lives as an ambassador for the kingdom of God when they wash the feet of prostitutes, imitating the life of Jesus, so as to plant a seed of His Kingdom that will grow into a full fruit tree. This is what it means to be in this world but not of this world.

When it comes to politics and voting, Americans live in a society, part of the kingdom of the world, that asks for their opinion in how it should operate. Every couple of years, it offers its citizens the opportunity to vote for their leaders and laws of the land. This is a free and wonderful gift, but it does create a unique tension: *how do we balance the influence we may have on government as kingdom of the world participants while possessing the authority we have as citizens of God's kingdom?* As followers of Jesus, we are called to walk just as He walked. In God's kingdom, the way of life is Jesus' upside-down, power through service, self-sacrificial, laying down one's life for the enemy, turning the other cheek, blessing those who persecute you kind of love.

In other words, what Jesus did in a micro way the Church is to do in a macro way, advancing His kingdom in the lives of others. Jesus says “[the world] will know you are disciple by how you love” (John 13:35). We are to embody the immensurable, love of God. This Calvary like love is never rooted in “power over”, but “power under.” God uses the kingdom of this world for His purposes and to advance order in the world, but because it lies under the rule of the adversary, the satan, followers of Jesus must not be too closely wedded to the kingdom of the world. They must live in such a way to ensure they are not trying to advance the Kingdom of

God by way of the kingdom of the world, for the kingdom Jesus is “establishing is not of this world”, and it operates very differently than the governments of this world (John 18:36).

This does not mean Christians should disconnect and retreat. Rather, Christians must recognize that way of the world, power over, is never going to run parallel with the way of God’s kingdom, power under. Followers of Jesus must walk with a clean conscious in the kingdom of the world-voting, conducting business, and living in their convictions- while never compromising their devotion to the way of God’s kingdom. God does not expect the kingdom of this world, as long as it is ruled by the satan, to turn the other cheek, but He expects those who live in His kingdom to. God does not expect the kingdom of this world to bless those who persecute it, but He expects His followers to. God does not expect the kingdom of this world to lay down its life for its enemies, but He expects the Church to. The kingdom of this world is to carry the sword, that is how it has been set up, and by its very definition, power over, it will never be the kingdom of God. But somehow, in some way, the Church’s self-sacrificial love and service is the means by which lives will be changed, restored humans will come to know Him, and creation will be prepared for the ultimate rule of God’s kingdom.

It is imperative for followers of Jesus to distinguish their unique call to fight the enemy, the evil principalities of this world, not our political opponents, through the kingdom of God. Most people respond to this proclamation by asking *was it not good then for the governments of the world to stop Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime during World War II? Are we not supposed to stand up against sin?* To the first question let me reiterate, God uses the governments of this world to uphold justice, law, order, and protection of its people. So, when they put down the evil regimes of this world by means of the sword, it is good. Just because they do that, it does not mean they are advancing God’s kingdom. They are a means of themselves to ensure that people

have the opportunity to experience God's kingdom, which comes through a Jesus like expression of Calvary like love through word and deed.

Regarding Christians using the government to stop sin, one can sin and not commit a crime, while they can also commit a crime without sinning. For example, someone could have broken a Jim Crow Law (sitting on the front of the bus) but not have sinned, while someone else can be gluttonous with food or have lack self-control and not have committed a crime. Jesus came so that all humanity may have eternal life, that is, a personal relationship with the Father and Son, not to just correct behavior (John 3:16, 17:3). Jesus did not come to improve the kingdom of the world; He came to give us a radically different way of living in a radically different kingdom.

Jesus' heart on how to irradicate sin is best depicted with a story about a farm boy. There once was an artistic, farm boy who grew up in the Midwest. On his days at the farm, collecting eggs and tending sheep, He would take cow pies and sculpt them into beautiful objects. He would bring them home and put shellack all over the cowpie to the point that you could not even tell it was manure. He would sell them at farmers markets because no one could tell what this beautifully crafted object really was on the inside. Now, while some manure is better looking than others, especially those that have been glossed over with a veneer, it does not change the fact that it is still manure. Similarly, while certain laws or governmental actions can dress up the kingdom of the world to look like the kingdom of God, it will never be the kingdom of God. It will just be a cover up, but still the kingdom of the world, which does not mean it is transforming hearts. Changing the outside does not clean the inside.

It seems the best way to take a stand against the kingdom of the world is by serving others in the kingdom-of-God-kind-of-way. If one's goal is to stop sin, I would encourage them

to find the most detestable group of people in their eyes, and serve, come under them, and love them for three years. The Spirit of God uses His “power under”, others serving, disciples to get in past the shellack and externals of people and speak to their heart. We can and should have laws that stop a rapist from raping, but only God and His Spirit can change the heart of people, including a rapist. This is why we were created, to be His image bearing, light shining, mouthpieces, His hands and feet, to carry out and accomplish His rule and reign of His kingdom, His way.

For Christians, everything hangs on our willingness to imitate Jesus and trusting the power of the cross. Even when it looks like we are losing, even when our rights are being denied, even when it looks like immorality is taking over, even when it makes so much sense to act as the kingdom of this world would. As good as democracy is, it is not the salvation, hope, or light of this world or hope of the world; only Jesus is. There seems to be a widespread assumption that the church is politically relevant if we play the political game by the standards of the kingdom of the world. I say, we should not care or do things to be politically relevant, but when we become the kingdom of God people, by the God’s terms, the Church, the people of God, we will always be politically relevant.

When Christians vote on laws and politicians, as is afforded to them in America, they should do so in their personal convictions, shaped by their relationship with Jesus and His Word. While the Bible does not specifically state how the “sword” should be wielded in the kingdom of the world, something Jesus places much less-to no emphasis on, I believe there does not need to be unity. When it comes to the way Christians further the kingdom of God, there should be a resounding oneness. We must be careful not to get sucked into thinking that our opinion on the kingdom of the world is precisely our stance on the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, the stakes are high for the church to ensure they do not think that partaking in national or local elections, while still good, is the means by which the kingdom of God will advance on this earth. On the contrary, the kingdom of God will prevail only by the people of God incarnating the very life of Jesus to the world. Missing this could undermine the mission and purpose of the church right in our own land. While the establishment of government and the freedom Christians have to partake in civic duties is a good thing, it does not make it the way of Jesus. The way the kingdom of God functions is a completely other category than that of the world. Since, every Christians is first and foremost a citizen of heaven, institutions who operate by the standards of the kingdom of the world cannot bring the kingdom of God to earth. Only a self-sacrificial, others serving, Calvery way of life is how the kingdom of God will become a reality on earth, just as it is in heaven.

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