

**Christianity and Politics – Session 1**  
**Adult Sunday School – Trinity Baptist Church**  
**March 7, 2021**

*Opening Disclaimer:* This is a controversial and challenging topic. At times, discussions about Christianity and politics have caused (or exposed) divisions between Christian believers, family members, and friends. We do not approach this topic carelessly or lightly. At the same time, it is not healthy for a church simply to avoid discussing a topic which the Bible does speak about in many places. Romans 12:2 tells us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” If we don’t let the Bible’s teaching renew and transform us, we will tend to get dragged down into the fallen and ungodly ways of this present world (and we can all identify some of those). Therefore, I will not begin by commenting on the most recent elections, or assessing the latest political trends, or sharing my strongest political opinions. (In a class of this length, there is no way that I could attempt to say everything, or even to say everything that I would consider important and timely, on a topic such as this. So if I don’t address a particular issue in this class, that doesn’t mean I consider it to be unimportant.) But I want to begin by looking carefully at what the Bible says, trusting that God has given us his Word for our good in this area as in many other areas of life. My hope and prayer is that each of us would be more fully shaped by God’s revelation in his word, as we seek to live faithfully for Christ within the kingdoms of this world.

**What does the Bible say about government in general, its purpose and its dangers?**

Broadly speaking, the Bible holds together two perspectives:

- On the one hand, *governments are God’s servants for our good*
  - Instituted to restrain evil and provide some measure of stability and justice in this fallen world (Genesis 9:5-6; Romans 13:1-7)
  - By promoting peace, order, freedom, and flourishing, good government also enables the church to carry out its redemptive mission
    - Note the progression in 1 Timothy 2:1-4: pray for civil authorities, so that we may live peaceful and godly lives, so that many people would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth
    - The early church spread quickly throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire in part due to its extensive road system and relative stability
    - We should be thankful for the blessings that our government provides (e.g. public safety, well-maintained roads, electricity and other utilities, mail delivery, stable currency, etc.) that enable us to meet regularly, communicate with one another, proclaim the gospel, and support missionaries
- On the other hand, *governments in this fallen world tend to become evil beasts*
  - Psalm 2 speaks about the nations and rulers of this world raging and conspiring against the rightful authority of God
  - Governments can perpetrate great evil and injustice. Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites and eventually tried to exterminate them. Jesus was condemned to death by Pilate and Herod, the civil authorities of his time.
  - Daniel 7-8 and Revelation 13 compare world empires to a series of terrifying, devouring beasts (but these same passages remind us that God is still sovereign even over the most unrighteous of worldly governments)

**How should God’s church relate to earthly governments?** We see a variety of different arrangements between the “church” (God’s people) and the “state” (earthly governments) in the Old and New Testaments:

- From the exodus until the Babylonian exile, Israel was a political nation-state

- The Mosaic Law described Israel as a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (Exodus 19); it not only provided spiritual guidance for God’s people but also described how the government should function and prescribed civil penalties for those who disobeyed God’s law
- The Davidic kingdom attempted to put the ideals of the Mosaic Law into practice, but it quickly divided and became corrupt like all the other nations
- Eventually, the Davidic kingdom came to an end in the Babylonian exile (586 BC)
- After the exile to Babylon, the kingdom of Israel was never fully re-established, but God’s people continued to exist both in the original land of Israel (with varying degrees of independence or lack thereof) as well as in the “diaspora”
  - Jeremiah 29 records a letter written to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, who wanted to return immediately to Jerusalem. Instead, Jeremiah urged them to “seek the *shalom* [i.e. peace, order, well-being, flourishing] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray for its *shalom*, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*” (29:7). This is a new emphasis: that God’s people can flourish even as a minority living under a pagan government.
- The New Testament echoes the Old Testament’s instructions to God’s people in exile
  - Christians are exiles in this present world, waiting for God’s kingdom to come in full when Christ returns
    - Hebrews 13:14 “here we have *no lasting city*, but we seek *the city that is to come*”
    - 1 Peter 1:1 “to those who are *elect exiles of the dispersion* in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”
  - The New Testament seems to discourage the idea of establishing a Christian political kingdom on earth
    - John 18:36 Jesus insists that his kingdom does not spread through military force: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting.”
    - Acts 1:6-8 Jesus redirects his disciples’ focus from “restoring the kingdom to Israel” (setting up a political kingdom in a particular place on earth) to “being my witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (being ambassadors of the risen and returning King everywhere)

### **How did Jesus and his disciples navigate political controversies in their day?**

- Jesus’ disciples included those from opposing political backgrounds. Most notably, the Twelve included:
  - Simon the Zealot (Zealots were ardent Jewish nationalists who advocated violent revolt against Rome)
  - Matthew the tax collector (Jewish tax collectors were seen as self-serving and dishonest collaborators with the pagan Roman government)
  - After Jesus’ resurrection, as the church spread out from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria and the ends of the earth, the potential for differing political views and backgrounds within the church throughout the world has only increased
- The process of discipleship, being with Jesus and in the community of his disciples, necessarily included a rethinking of political assumptions and a reshaping of political loyalties

- For the Zealots: Jesus repeatedly rejected the way of violence against Rome (turn the other cheek, etc.)
- For the tax collectors: Jesus consistently called them to repentance from their self-serving ways
- Whenever Jesus gathered his twelve disciples, Simon and Matthew were both in that circle, brought together under a greater loyalty and love for Jesus the King

## REFLECT AND DISCUSS

1. Why do you think Jesus intentionally recruited disciples from opposite ends of the political spectrum in his day?
2. Have you ever struggled to find unity with other Christians whose political instincts, backgrounds, or loyalties differ from yours (think of Simon the zealot and Matthew the tax collector being in the same small group of 12 guys for at least three years during Jesus' public ministry)?
3. Has following Jesus and being part of God's church reshaped any of your political assumptions or attitudes toward government over time? In what ways?

## What does the New Testament teach about the Christian's attitude toward government?

- In general, Christians are commanded to honor and submit to the civil authorities (because governments are God's servants for our good)
  - Jesus paid the temple tax, even though he didn't have to (Matthew 17:24-27)
  - "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21)
  - "Be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1-7)
  - "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution...whether it be to the emperor...or to governors....Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (1 Peter 2:13-17)
  - Christians are commanded to pray for civil authorities (1 Timothy 2:1-2)
- However, in some situations, civil disobedience is justified and appropriate (because governments in this fallen world tend to become evil beasts)
  - Acts 5:29 "We must obey God rather than men" (apostles refuse to stop preaching the word of God, despite being told not to do so and threatened with arrest and execution)
  - The main leaders of the early church (e.g. Paul, Peter) were arrested and jailed for refusing to comply with the ungodly demands of civil authorities
  - Honoring civil authorities does not always mean obeying or agreeing with them
- We also see several examples of believers holding positions of civil authority
  - Old Testament examples of God's people in positions of civil authority *outside* the nation of Israel may be particularly instructive for Christians
    - Joseph organized a national program of famine relief in Egypt (Genesis 37-50)
    - Daniel exercised wisdom as a capable administrator within the Babylonian government
    - Esther advocated on behalf of the Jews when they were threatened with extermination in Persia
  - The New Testament gives us a few glimpses of believers holding positions of civil authority, though these were relatively rare in the early church
    - Tax collectors and soldiers came to be baptized by John (Luke 3:14)

- Unnamed centurion came to Jesus asking for healing of his son (Matthew 8:5-13)
- Cornelius, the Roman centurion and first Gentile convert (Acts 10)
- Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus, becomes a believer in Christ (Acts 13:7-12)
- Erastus, the treasurer of Corinth (Romans 16:23), was an active member of the church in Corinth and a supporter of Paul for many years (Acts 19:20; 2 Timothy 4:20). Note: archaeological inscription found in 1929 from mid-1<sup>st</sup> century also refers to Erastus as procurator and city official in Corinth.
- Note: none of these people are told to immediately leave their government posts in order to follow Jesus. Yet, being a disciple of Jesus was an even higher calling.

**On a personal level, how should Christians relate to political allies and political opponents?** Four broad errors that Christians can fall into regarding political engagement:

- *Withdrawal*: “The church should just avoid anything related to politics because it’s too controversial, worldly, complicated, etc.”
  - But the church is called to be salt and light in the world
  - Complete withdrawal can effectively promote aspects of the status quo that are evil and unjust
  - Christian involvement in politics and in broader society can be an expression of love of neighbor
  - However, not all Christians will be involved in the same way or to the same extent
- *Domination*: “The church is a means to a larger political end; we should engage all our resources toward promoting justice and righteousness; we should seek to fight and win the political battles of our day”
  - The church’s primary mission is not to win political battles but to proclaim and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ
  - We need to be careful not to let other legitimate concerns or endeavors displace the centrality of Christ
  - We should take a long-term view, knowing that God has called us to be faithful, whether or not we are “successful” in our lifetime
- *Panic*: “this next election will usher in the end of the world unless...”
  - One day Christ will return and judge the whole world in righteousness. This is our great hope!
  - In the meantime, God is sovereign even over bad governments (think of evil empires in the Bible: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, etc.), and God is sufficient to sustain his people even in the worst of times
  - Sooner or later, God will bring judgment on wicked rulers, often by causing them or their plans to self-destruct
  - Panic can be rooted in, or result in...
- *Idolatry*: “there is one political party, or one political leader, who will save us”
  - Throughout history, some political leaders have caused terrible destruction; others have promoted much good; the legacy of most has been very mixed

- It is entirely appropriate for a Christian to strongly support, or even publicly advocate for, a particular political party, movement, or candidate. But, 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. If we can't, or if we don't, is this a sign that we have slipped into a form of idolatry?
- It is entirely natural to recognize and point out the weaknesses and flaws of a political party, movement, or candidate whom we oppose. But again, Christians must also be distinctively shaped by Jesus' justice and mercy toward those we recognize as political opponents. Are we genuinely seeking to love our political "enemies", praying for them, being "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry"? Are we careful not to slander or misrepresent the views of those who we disagree with? Are we treating them as we would want them to treat us, looking for areas of common ground and shared concerns, as well as honestly recognizing where and why we disagree?

What are Christians called to, instead of withdrawal, domination, panic, or idolatry? We are called to be *faithfully present in this temporary and fallen world as ambassadors of Christ and his eternal kingdom*. Jonathan Leeman put it this way: "Respect and honor the legitimate institutions of this present age. Let them do their jobs and work for their good. But realize that they are passing, and do not give them your ultimate allegiance and hope. More concisely: work for love's sake, but don't let your hopes get too high."

## REFLECT AND DISCUSS

1. Have you felt particularly tempted by any of these four broad errors (withdrawal, domination, panic, or idolatry)? If so, why?
2. Think of a Christian believer who you respect, who has been faithfully present as an ambassador of Christ, whether as a public official or a private citizen. This could be someone who is 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 they've engaged with government?
3. "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 this statement? If so, name a political party, movement, or candidate that you support, voted for, or identify with. Give one reason for your support. Then name one weakness or flaw that you recognize in that party/movement/candidate, in light of Jesus' character.
4. "Christians must also be distinctively shaped by Jesus' justice and mercy toward those who we see as political opponents." Name a political party, movement, or candidate that you oppose, disagree with, or voted against. How are you seeking to follow Jesus' commands in how you relate to this person or group of people on an ongoing basis?

**Recommended Resources** (note: only Scripture is without error; we are not endorsing every word that each of these authors say; however, I do think that these books offer some helpful guidance and food for thought for American Christians in the present day)

Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age*

John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference*

Giboney, Wear, and Butler, *Compassion & Conviction*