

Political Activism: A Christian's Role

By Andrew R. Rappaport

What should be a Christian's role and responsibility in politics, has been a question throughout the centuries. In our current political climate, many Christians are more familiar with the Republican Party's message than that of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Many in the political world see Christians much like any other lobbyist or political action group. Is there a difference between the activism of a Christian in politics and a homosexual? Is it the responsibility of the Christian to be involved in politics and if so, at what levels? Should Christians be actively trying to change laws to create a more moral society? Unfortunately, many well known "Christian leaders" have used their pulpits and microphones to promote the message of the "Conservative Christian" over that of Jesus Christ. Is it Biblical for these leaders to do so? Should Christians support such ministries?

In America, all citizens have the obligation to vote and should honor that right. However, how much further should the Christian go to get their message out and what is that message? The past few decades have blurred the lines. It is time for Christians to reexamine their role and responsibility in political activism. The Scriptures teach a submission to government. Living the Christian life in an ungodly society is never easy.

The Early Church

How did the early church respond to their political scene? At first, the Roman government considered the church a sect of Judaism and therefore a legal religion. After the Roman government identified a shift in the teachings and position of the Christians and the Jews, the Romans quickly outlawed Christianity as an illegal religion. During the first few centuries, the church went through great persecution in different areas of the Roman Empire. The actions of the early Christians provide today's Christians with an example of the Biblical model.

During the persecution of the early church, the Christians practiced their religious worship to God. If the Roman authorities discovered these activities, it could mean death, torture or being feed to the loins at the arenas. Although the consequences were extremely severe, many Christians faced death rather than disobeying God. Some Christians almost looked forward to the suffering as a badge of honor to suffer for Christ. Even when the government would come looking for the Christians they were willing suffer the consequences for their obedience to God. They did not use their energy and resources to change the political view of Christianity; they focused on the gospel.

The writing of the New Testament occurred under a pagan, hostile and anti-Semitic Roman government. Many assumed that Christianity was nothing more than a sect of Judaism. Believers became the objects of slander and malicious rumors due to their close association with Judaism. The authorities accused Christians of insurrection against Rome, being atheists because they refused to worship pagan gods, cannibalism because their enemies distorted the teaching regarding Communion, immorality and incestuous relationships because they refer to each other as brothers and sisters, damaging the idol-

making trade business, destroying family life by introducing Christ into the lives of some family members, fostering slave rebellion by giving dignity to slaves through new life in Christ and hating people because they would not adopt the world's ways. Therefore, when looking at the Scripture's commands to submit to civil authorities it is based on submitting to a government hostile to the Christian faith.

Scriptural View toward Government

There are clear instructions in the Scripture regarding a believer's role and responsibility toward government. The Scripture also provides clear examples of people who lived out these instructions. The first six chapters of the book of Daniel provide an outstanding example of four men that knew God's instructions and lived them out.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are examples of people submitting to the laws of the foreign government unless it requires disobedience to God. Daniel did not try to form a large group of politically active captives, refusing to eat the king's food. Daniel worked with the governing authorities not against them. He did not choose between two seemingly conflicting absolutes. Daniel did not stop trying after the first failed attempt. Daniel continued to work with the authorities to secure a peaceful solution that pleased both God and the king. Daniel trusted God to work out the conclusion. His focus was neither on the government nor its laws, but on obedience to God. However, later in the book of Daniel we see that they were willing to obey God no matter the cost.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah also provide examples where obedience to God may cause disobedience to government. When Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah refused to worship an idol, it was obedience to God not to government. When Daniel refused to stop worshipping God for one month, his concern was God not the government. Both situations contain the issue of obedience to God over that of government. They did not rebel due to their rights or honor but God's. They accepted the punishment due them for their disobedience to the governing authorities. They did not fight the consequences but willingly submitted to the government, even when the government was requesting disobedience to God.

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My

good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive. (NKJV)

The context of this text is that God had announced His punishment to the nation of Israel, specifically the southern tribes known as Judah. His punishment, much like for the northern tribes, was captivity. God has used Jeremiah to tell the nation that Babylon will come and take them captive. God addressed the people to behave during the 70 years of captivity. The people were to build houses to dwell in, plant gardens to eat the fruit, take wives, beget sons and daughters, take wives for sons and give daughters to bear sons and daughters. The purpose for this is some that the nation of Israel will increase during the captivity.

How does God want His children to response to their captors? God explains that they are to “*seek the peace of the city*”. They were not to rebel against Babylon. They were to understand that God caused them to be captive. They were to live to the glory of God not to be concerned with the temporal world. Being captive under a pagan nation’s rule was God’s will and to fight it would be to sin. God does not want His children to focus on their captivity nor the nation that rules over them. God promises that they will return to Israel and He will gather them from all nations, which He has driven them, under one condition. That condition is that they obey God and turn to Him. Even during captivity, God commands Israel to make peace and seek God not political overthrow.

What is more important to God: obedience or political? Clearly, God desires obedience and has to remind His children that He is sovereign. This passage reveals that nothing that happens, even in governments, without God’s control. God uses governments to fulfill His plans (c.f. Dan. 2:21). Therefore, God’s people should not rebel against governments because it would be rebelling against God’s will. God’s says to be at peace with the governing authorities. The issue is to trust God’s sovereignty and not to take issues into their own hands. They were not to attempt to change the culture through politics but to be an example of Godly living, as the example with Daniel.

Proverbs 24:21-22

My son, fear the Lord and the king; Do not associate with those given to change; For their calamity will rise suddenly, And who knows the ruin those two can bring? (NKJV)

As only the wisest man that ever lived until his time could say it, Solomon not only provides instruction but reasoning. First, fear the Lord and then the king or ruling authorities. The power of these two verses is the reasoning giving as to who to associate with and who not to associate. The Lord is unchanging throughout time (Heb. 13:8), therefore, like a rock, He is unmoved. Next is the king. Although kings or governments

change they are usually stable for a long duration and they are usually, more stable than the fickle masses of people. Solomon states not to “*associate with those given to change*”. There are always the masses of fickle people that complain. Solomon recognized that and told his son to stay away from those that just cry for change.

His instruction is not without its reasoning. Solomon states that their calamity will come very quickly, almost without warning. There will always be those that just desire change, because the grass always looks greener on the other side. Remembering that those involved in political activism are attempting to change the laws of the land and will never be content with the government’s role. Contentment will come with the eternal kingdom and its perfect ruler, who is the object of a Christian’s attention.

Matthew 22:15-21

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (NKJV)

The Pharisees and Herodians thought they had Jesus trapped with their questioning. They thought that if Jesus said not to pay taxes they could turn Him over to Roman authorities. If He said to pay the taxes then He would lose popularity with the people. Jesus delineates the two worlds that believers deal with, one the government (secular) and the other worship (religious). Jesus wants believers to live in both worlds not to choose. Believers are to support the government and the worship of God, whither it be by tithes for a temple tax or offering to the local church. Part of obeying God is submitting to governmental laws. The Christian should be heavenly minded, but still in this world to affect it with the gospel not politics.

1 Timothy 2:1-3

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, (NKJV)

Paul exhorts Timothy to instruct believers to pray for all men, but especially for governing authorities. Paul is not stating to pray for those kings who support Christianity or at least Christian morals. Paul instructs all to pray for all men, including those that were persecuting the church. Paul is also explicit about the pattern of that prayer. The prayers should be **supplications**, which means making requests for salvation of the

rulers. **Prayers** are general words for prayer. **Intercessions** are making petitions on behalf of others, saved and unsaved alike. Lastly, prayers that are **giving of thanks** to God for those leaders, good or evil.

Clearly, believers should not be calling down the wrath of God on the immoral leaders. Instead, believers should be interceding on behalf of those wicked leaders. The purpose is that believers may live a quiet and peaceable life, with both God and government. Paul further states that this type of attitude and action is good and acceptable in the sight of God. Christians should be politically active in their prayer life on behalf of the governmental authorities and wait on the Lord to do His good will.

Titus 3:1-2

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. (NKJV)

Paul lays out for Titus explanation of the attitude Christians should have toward all men, in the context of obedience to authorities. Believers are to obey, ready to work and not speaking negatively. The world might have a different view of Christians if they did not act like a political action group but instead approached politics with a peaceable, gentle and humble spirit. People naturally complain and desire change. Therefore, they speak evil and negative toward their government and its leaders.

Christians should not be so. Paul calls believers to willful submission to government and all men. This attitude would change the face of the political discussion if the evil speaking stops completely among Christians. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders are encouraging the complete opposite. Many have stopped the idea of praying for leaders and instead spend time attacking those same leaders in email, conversations, etc. Christians, of all people, must be careful of the speech used. A Christian is a representative of Jesus Christ on earth and must always present Christ in His glory.

1 Peter 2:13-17

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (NKJV)

Peter commands believers to respect and submit to every civil authority, even unjust ones. He does not say to submit only to those ordinances of man we agree, but Peter says to submit “*to every ordinance*”. The reason for this submission is for the Lord’s sake. It is God’s reputation on the line not the believers. Believers must view their obedience to government as obedience to God. God, as the one whom ordains government and must have children that submit to it. Submission to government should be at every level whether to punish or praise. It does not matter if the authority is a king, president or local

police officer; Christians must obey them all. Obedience is to every position of civil authority without regard to competency, morality, reasonableness, or any other caveat. When governing authorities uphold law and order they function as God's ministers, fulfilling a God-ordained role of keeping order in society. If a person obeys the law, he has no reason to fear.

Peter makes it clear that it is the will of God to submit to the government. Many Christians are rebelling against their governments and at the same time requesting God's will. God's will is to submit to the government unless that government is requesting a direct disobedience to God. Christians should not be taking the punishment role into their own hands. There have been some "Christians" killing abortion doctors when that is the role of the government. If the government does not obey its God-ordained role, it is God's responsibility to punish the government in His time. Christians should not attempt to use civil disobedience or any other type of disobedience to affect laws. Christians should never attempt to take the law into their own hands.

The reason for this submission is to silence the foolish men by doing good. The goal is the Gospel not moral laws and people. Christians would enjoy living in a moral society, but they must remember that morality is not righteousness. What good is a society that is morally on its way to hell? The attitude toward government should be as a slave to God. A slave disobeys not his master and a Christian's Master is God. God will bring submission to His established governments. Christians should submit to government to honor God, by waiting upon His good timing.

Romans 13:1-7

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgement on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (NKJV)

As with each text the command is clear: submit to governing authorities in all matters that do not cause direct disobedience to God's explicit commands. The reasoning is because God has appointed those governments. The Lord has ordained or appointed all governing authorities. There is no authority except those established by God. God uses civil governments as an instrument not an end unto itself. Resisting governing authorities opposes the ordinance of God. Those that do resist the government suffer for disobedience by the hand of the government. Suffering for disobedience sake is not

persecution, it is punishment. Even an immoral and corrupt government is better than no government. God established governments to promote and protect the lives of its citizens. Therefore it not a terror to the good but to the evil. Those that obey the government have nothing to fear from it.

Paul views the government a minister of God. Governments receive the authority from God to carry out punishment with the use of force (the bearing of the sword). Therefore, when a believer submits to government, he is obeying the Lord. Although slavery, physical abuse, murder and immorality dominated Roman society and government, believers were to submit to civil authority because it was divinely ordained. Believers must remember that God's in control of all situations. Christians should be obedient to God, which requires willing, submissive obedience to government. This type of obedience is what is due the government from a child of God.

Conclusion

Christians must be civilly obedient not civilly disobedient, except if the civil authorities demand disobedience to God. Submission to government is part of obedience to God. The focus of the Christian life is God. Therefore, the temporal, earthly life should be viewed as only temporary not as eternal. The focus is eternity with God, where there will be a perfect ruling government. The corruption of all human governments is because of the sinful nature of the people ruling those governments.

Resistance to the government often manifests in antagonism toward the very lost people God has called Christians to reach with the gospel. When the church emphasizes political activism and social reforming, it always diverts energy and resources from evangelism and discipleship. Believers must always be aware of their language and tone to be ready and able to present the gospel. Persecuted and imprisoned believers should be in that state for preaching righteous not defying the government.

Christians should be motivated toward God. During the reformation, the reformers taught people to read, not to better society, but so that they could read God's Word on there own. The reformers were not attempting to improve the culture, although they did, their concern was with the souls of the people. The Christian responsibility is to God first, before country. The political arena and its rhetoric have no power to bring about the spiritual transformation that society needs. Many Christians have become side tracked with politics at the expense of their relationship with God. The adversaries desire to distract Christians any way they can and the obsession with politics accomplishes the goal.

What is the great commission from the Lord? In Matthew 28:19-20, it is not to change the governmental laws or make a moral society. It is to make disciples of all people. The language is to make disciple as you go. Every Christian's duty with others should be with the goal of making disciples for Christ not the Republicans. The Christians should know Christ's message better than Bush's. Otherwise, they will not be ready in season and out of season.

By attempting to reform society using human means, denigrated the sovereignty of God over governments. To use human means is a selfish pursuit. The result could create a

false sense of morality. The Christian political activism will result in creating a reputation as rabble-rousing malcontents and foster hostility toward unbelievers that alienates them from the gospel of Christ. The believer's political involvement should never displace the priority of preaching and teaching the gospel.

What is the cause of this temporal view of the Christian life? There is a lack of interest in the future kingdom and an overriding obsession with the here-and-now. Christians need to keep their focus on God and His kingdom in heaven and not try to make His kingdom on earth, by human means. God established the governments, both good and bad. He uses them for His glory. Christians should vote and understand the issues with the government, but never compromise of the gospel or the testimony of Christ. God's message must clearly go forth. Only God will change the culture in His time, by His methods, one person at a time. God changes cultures by changing individual hearts toward Him.