

THE CHURCH AND STATE

The Biblical Balance

“All things have been created by Him and for Him...” *Col. 1:16*

Is Anything Out of Bounds?

Subjects like socialism, government, economics, politics, and social issues are often considered “out of bounds,” meaning they have no place in the church. But such a claim insinuates that these topics fall outside of God’s authority, when the Bible teaches that “the earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it” (*Ps. 24:1; Col. 1:16*). In other words, nothing falls outside of God’s superintendence. As the Creator, He retains the right to speak into any topic, no matter how controversial. We should seek His wisdom on all subjects.

The better question we should be asking is this, “Does God have anything to say about these topics?” If He does, then we are obliged to know what it is. “All Scripture is... profitable for teaching...” (*2 Tim. 3:16*), and we are to read, study, and teach all Scripture, “the whole counsel of God” (*Acts 20:26, 27*). The Bible has much to say about the issues that concern us. Looking at them from His perspective enlightens our understanding and cultivates a biblical worldview.

Six Views of Church and State

Historically, Christians have held to six views regarding the church’s relationship to civil government. Wayne Grudem addresses these views in his book *Politics According to the Bible*. The following paragraphs are excerpts from Grudem.

The first view is the idea that *civil government should compel people to support or follow one particular religion*. For example, Saudi Arabia enforces laws compelling people to follow Islam. Legislation contained in the Koran becomes the basic law of the State. However, this view is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus and with the nature of faith.

Jesus distinguished the realms of God and Caesar (*Matt. 22:18-21*). He also refused to compel people to believe in Him (*Luke 9:52-55*). Genuine faith cannot be forced. True faith in God must be voluntary. Therefore, governments should never attempt to force people to follow or believe in one specific religion, rather they should guarantee freedom of religion for followers of all religions. [This view aligns with the original understanding of the separation of Church and State.]

The opposite of the “compel religion” position is the second view that says *Christians should completely exclude religion from government and politics*. Accordingly, religious beliefs should never be mentioned in governmental functions or on government property and should never play a role in the political process. Religious belief should be kept at home. [This position aligns with the new distorted interpretation of the separation of Church and State.]

The “reject religion from all government” view fails to distinguish the reasons for a law from the content of the law. There are religious reasons behind many of our laws, but these laws do not establish a religion. This view also overrides the will of the people, society’s true authority, and this view changes freedom of religion to freedom from religion. It wrongly restricts freedom of religion and freedom of speech; and, it removes from government God’s teaching about good and evil. [God has much to say about government. In fact, government was His idea. Therefore, to remove His influence from civil government contradicts His original intent.]

According to the third view, *all use of government power is deeply infected by demonic forces*. Satan told Jesus that all worldly kingdoms had been given to him (*Luke 4:5-7*). But we must remember that Satan is the father of lies. Government is a gift from God, something that is subject to His rule and used by Him for His purposes. [He is Sovereign, not Satan.]

The fourth view is promoted by those who say that the Church is *only called to preach the Gospel*, not to deal with politics. However, this view of the Gospel is too narrow. The Gospel is about God’s good news for all

of life. To preach the whole Gospel is to preach the entirety of God's Word, even what He says about civil government. Which parts of the Bible should the Church not preach about? Since these things are included in the Bible, God must count them important for the advancement of His purposes. Forgiveness of sins is not the only message of the Gospel. The Gospel affects every area of life, including [government and] politics.

The fifth view says that the Church should *try to elect leaders, change laws, and transform the culture*. This view is often referred to as the Social Gospel or social activism, when the Church focuses on fixing social problems politically and places its trust in government to save society. If we ever begin to think that good leaders or good laws alone will solve a nation's problems or bring about a righteous and just society, we will have made a huge mistake.

The sixth view is the biblical view. Christians should *seek to influence civil government according to God's moral standards* and His purposes for government as revealed in the Bible. This view is not compulsion, it is not silence, it is not dropping out of the process, nor is it thinking that only government can save us. It is much closer to the teaching of the Bible. The Bible includes many examples of God's people influencing civil government. Without Christian influence, governments have no clear moral compass. If Christians are silent, then where will moral standards come from? The Church is the pillar of truth and morality in society (*1 Tim. 3:15*).

Separation of Church and State

How does the view of Christians influencing government reconcile with the separation of Church and State? First, we must understand that the modern definition of this separation has been distorted from its original meaning. Today, separation of Church and State means that the two institutions can have nothing to do with each other. For example, Bibles, prayer, and the Ten Commandments are not allowed in government-run schools, Christmas trees cannot be placed on government property, and pastors cannot talk about political issues. This interpretation has

sparked the "Freedom from Religion Movement," which is opposite of the original intent.

The words "separation, church, and state" do not appear in any of America's founding documents. The idea came from a quote by our third President Thomas Jefferson. He wrote a letter to a group of Baptists who were concerned that the federal government was going to establish one denomination for all Americans. Jefferson wrote in the letter that this action was impossible because "there exists a wall of separation between Church and State." He was referring to the *First Amendment* of the Constitution, which prohibits Congress from establishing laws regarding religion. However, what Jefferson intended and understood by "separation" has since been used against religion in America, particularly against Christianity.

The Founders believed in the separation of Church and State, but their position was based on biblical grounds. For example, Jesus separated God and Caesar when He instructed people to give to both (*Matt. 22:18-21*). Jesus was indicating that priests and rulers have separate duties, and both need money to perform them. In the Old Testament, God separated the responsibilities of kings and priests. Anytime that a ruler crossed the line and performed a duty of a priest, he was reprimanded or punished. In other words, there exists a natural, God-ordained separation between Church and State.

The biblical understanding of the separation of Church and State is that the Church should not control the State, as in the days of the Popes in the Roman Catholic Church; and, the State should not control the Church, as in the days when monarchs forced their subjects into a particular church. Many of the people who fled to America in the 17th and 18th Centuries were fleeing religious persecution, both from the Church and the State. They sought religious freedom in the New World. These immigrants recognized the fact that rulers do not have the authority to determine how people should worship God.

Now, while the Church and State should never control the other, they should encourage one another. For example, the Church should encourage Christians to be good citizens and to obey the laws and leaders (*Rom. 13:1-7*). Likewise, the State should encourage people to go to church, where they are challenged to live moral lives, to be better citizens. The two entities should complement each other, not control each other.

However, the idea of the Church encouraging people to support the State is a fine line. On either side of that line are hazards that can lead churches in unbiblical directions. A church that supports the State too much falls into the trap of endorsing political parties, platforms, or candidates. Such a church may even put its confidence in political structures to affect change or save society. That hazard is referred to as the Social Gospel, looking to human means (government) for salvation or social change rather than to Christ's true Gospel. However, on the other side of the line, churches fail to say anything at all about government, politics, or social issues, thus depriving believers of a biblical worldview and leaving them to follow the world's perverted but persuasive arguments and actions.

Walking the Line

In 2011, our Elders articulated their understanding of the biblical relationship between the Church and the State. Note how they navigated that fine line.

“We are blessed to live in a nation in which its citizens can participate in the election of their leaders and the formation of their laws. As Christians, we are encouraged to be involved in that process, whether by discussing or supporting candidates, parties, and issues, or by voting or running for office. However, the subject in question is not the citizen but the Church, not the individual but the institution. What role should the Church, as a corporate body, play in this or any political system? Should the Church serve as an action committee, endorsing candidates and

parties? Should the Church play any role at all, or should it abandon the political arena altogether?” [What follows are the answers to these questions.] We will not endorse political candidates, platforms, or parties for the following reasons:

1. *To protect the Church from getting distracted from its divine mission*

The Church, as a corporate body, was established by God for advancing the Gospel¹ and edifying the followers of Christ,² not for the purpose of advancing a political agenda.

2. *To protect the Church from false teaching and doctrinal impurity*

By endorsing candidates, the Church is condoning their beliefs and behavior, which may or may not align with biblical teaching and which ambitious men may distort and use to their advantage.³

3. *To protect the Church from being unequally yoked*

Christ and His Kingdom transcend all political candidates, platforms, and parties.⁴ Thus, it is unfitting and unwise for His Church to associate with them. Such a union hinders the Church's effectiveness to minister.

4. *To protect the Church from placing its hope in human ability*⁵

By endorsing candidates or parties, the Church is putting its confidence in the abilities of men to transform the culture externally, when men should put their hope in God to transform the culture internally.

“The Church has a critical role to play in the political arena. The hope for society is the Gospel, and the Church is the pillar and support for that hope.⁶ The most powerful tools we have to change the culture are to propagate the Gospel and disciple the saved. We must not substitute politics for the power of Christ to change lives. Sin is the source of all our

¹ *Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 3:15*

² *Rom. 12:10; 15:14; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Thess. 5:11*

³ *1 Cor. 8:9; 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 4:14, 15; 5:6; Col. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:20*

⁴ *Matt. 28:18a; John 18:36; 19:11; 2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 John 1:6*

⁵ *Psalm 40:4, 118:8; Prov. 3:5-7; Eph. 3: 20-21; Col. 1:27*

⁶ *1 Tim. 3:15*

troubles. Christ, working in the hearts of individuals, is the solution.

“We are committed to advancing the Gospel of Christ, which includes the whole counsel of God; yet, as we stand by God’s clear teaching in Scripture, we recognize that His standards of truth and morality will, in time, become political, as they confront the beliefs and practices of secular society. Therefore, it is impossible for the Church to operate in isolation from the political arena.

“In summary, in order to protect the body of Christ, we are choosing to refrain from political endorsements on biblical grounds and, instead, to emphasize only what the Church can and should do -- promote the Gospel as the power of God for salvation,⁷ equip its congregants with a biblical worldview, and encourage them to glorify Christ in society, wherever God may choose to use them.”

Can you discover in this statement the fine line between supporting the State too much and saying nothing at all? Where are the dangers of the Social Gospel mentioned? How does this statement align with the biblical view of the Christian’s influence in the political arena? Does this view allow the Church to talk about issues without crossing the line?

The Principle Approach

Though it is common to hear, “The Church can’t get political,” that statement is impossible to follow. Whether Christians like it or not, the world (under the influence of Satan) will oppose the Church at all turns and will not allow its doctrines or beliefs to co-exist with its secular policies. In other words, sooner or later, the world will outlaw the views and values of the Church – sanctity of life, gender, marriage -- until the Church is gone. The church cannot continue to retreat and give ground to the enemy. If it does, the enemy will eventually make gathering as a church, even the Gospel itself illegal. What will Christians do then? The Church will get political then, but it will be too late at that point to stop the State.

Notice in our statement that one of the goals of the church is to “equip its congregants with a biblical worldview.” The world wants to talk about and divide over the pressing issues that face us, but few people understand the underlying principles behind those issues. We must help Christians understand the spiritual battle behind the issues of our day.

Taking Captives

When the Constitution was written in 1787, its purposes were stated in its Preamble. One of those purposes is “to secure the blessings of liberty.” In other words, Americans can use the Constitution as a tool to protect their liberty from danger. However, if Americans become ignorant of the Constitution, then they can easily be deceived. Their liberties can be given or taken away.

The same concept applies to Scripture. Paul wrote “See to it that no one takes you *captive* through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (*Col. 2:8*). Instead, he wrote, “Take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ...” (*2 Cor. 10:3-5*). We are either taking ideas captive, or they are taking us captive.

The philosophies of men are often backwards and harmful. They lead societies to oppression and death (*Prov. 14:12*), and unsuspecting Christians often fall prey to their schemes because they do not rightly apply God’s Word to the issues. Instead, we must be like the men of Issachar, who “understand the times, with knowledge of what to do” (*1 Chron. 12:32*).

In summary, all things were created by God and for God (*Col. 1:16*) – including the Church and the State – and they are to be ordered and directed as He commands. We must strive to think biblically about everything, including politics, which simply include civil government and its actions. By applying our faith, we will keep our freedom, for Christ and His Gospel set us free both internally (from sin) and externally (from oppression).

⁷ *Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18*