

Why Christians Should Influence Government for Good¹

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A. Christian influence on government: Five wrong views

1. “Government should compel religion”

- Many Christians held this view in previous centuries; this view provided impetus for a number of European “wars of religion,” both between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and between Reformed and Anabaptist groups.
- Over time, this view lost favor as more and more Christians realized that it was inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus and with the nature of faith itself
 - a. Jesus distinguished the realms of God and of Caesar
 - **Mt 22:21:** Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
 - b. Jesus refused to try to compel people to believe in him
 - **Lk 9:55:** And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them.
 - c. Genuine faith cannot be forced
 - d. Not a worldly kingdom
 - **Jn 18:36:** Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

2. “Exclude religion from government”

- This view is promoted by the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and much of secular society
- This view holds that religious belief should be kept at home and quiet, that there should be no influence from religious groups in the political process
- Examples: Colorado constitutional amendment (*Romer v. Evans*); overturned death penalties; valedictorian’s speech restricted, etc.
 - a. It overrides the will of the people
 - b. It changes freedom of religion into freedom from religion
 - It distorts the meaning of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech...”
 - c. It wrongly restricts freedom of religion and freedom of speech
 - d. It was never adopted by the American people
 - *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971): Government actions “must not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion”
 - e. It removes from government God’s teaching about good and evil
 - **Ro 13:4:** For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.
 - f. Biblical examples of God’s people giving counsel to rulers (Dan 4:27; Lk 3:19; Acts 24:25)
 - g. The spiritual basis for the “exclude religion” view

¹ This outline 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), chapters 1-2.

3. “All government is demonic”

- According to this view, all government power is deeply infected by evil, demonic forces
 - Those who hold this view usually prefer military pacifism
 - This view has been strongly promoted by Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*
- a. Support from Luke 4:6
- **Lk 4:5-7:** 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.”
- b. The mistake of depending on Luke 4:6
- **Jn 8:44:** You are of your father the devil....When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
 - The notion that Satan rules earthly kingdoms is in contrast with other clear biblical passages:
 - **Da 4:17:** The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’
 - **Ro 13:1:** 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.
 - **1 Pet 2:13-14:** Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

4. “Do evangelism, not politics”

- Though this view is expressed often in personal conversations, the writers who tend in this direction qualify their statements by affirming the appropriateness of some political influence by the church, though they argue it will not do any spiritual or eternal good (Cal Thomas, John MacArthur)
- a. Too narrow an understanding of “the Gospel” and the kingdom of God
- **Mt 28:19-20:** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- b. The “whole Gospel” includes a transformation of society
- **1 Jn 3:8:** The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
- c. Which parts of the Bible should the church not preach about?
- d. God leaves Christians here on earth both to do evangelism and to do good for others
- **Ga 6:10:** So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.
 - **Eph 2:10:** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
 - **Mt 5:16:** In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
- e. God established both the church and the government to restrain evil
- f. Christians have influenced governments positively throughout history
- 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)
 - Outlawing the gladiatorial contests (in 404)
 - Outlawing the branding of criminal’s faces (in 315)
 - Instituting prison reforms (in 361), stopping human sacrifice among the Irish, the Prussians, the Lithuanians, and the Aztec and Mayan Indians
 - Outlawing pedophilia
 - Granting property rights and other protections to women
 - Banning polygamy
 - Prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India (in 1829)
 - Outlawing the binding of young women’s feet in China (in 1912)
 - Initiating public schools in Germany (in the 16th century)

- Advocating compulsory education of all children in many European countries
- Opposing and often abolishing slavery in the Roman Empire, Ireland, most of Europe, and the US (more than 2/3 of the abolitionists in the US in the mid-1830's were Christian clergymen)
- The formulation of the Magna Carta (1215)
- The formulation of The Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution of the United States (1787)
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- 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.
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- Today, tens of thousands of Christians form the backbone of the pro-life movement, which continues to work for the prohibition of abortion (except to save the life of the mother) in the US

g. But won't political involvement distract us from the main task of preaching the Gospel?

5. "Do politics, not evangelism"

- This view holds that the church should seek to change laws and culture, and should de-emphasize evangelism
- This was a primary emphasis of the Social Gospel movement (late 19th to early 20th centuries)
- This view has **not** been advocated by leaders at Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council, the 700 Club, Concerned Women for American, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the American Center for Law and Justice, or the Moral Majority.
- Yet, if we ever begin to think that good laws alone will solve a nation's problems, we will have made a huge mistake
- Genuine change will happen:
 - (1) If people's hearts change so they seek good rather than evil—the result of evangelism and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
 - (2) If people's minds change so their moral convictions align more closely with God's moral standards—the result of conversation, teaching, public discussion, and debate
 - (3) If a nation's laws change to more fully encourage good conduct and punish wrong conduct—the result of Christian political involvement

A Better Solution: Significant Christian Influence on Government

A. Examples from the Bible

1. Old Testament examples

Gen. 41:39-40: Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. ⁴⁰ You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you."

Da 4:27: 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."

Je 29:7: But 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.

Esther 4:16: Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.

Est. 10:3: For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus

Ne 1:11: Now I was cupbearer to the king.

See also: Isaiah 13-23; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2; Obadiah; Jonah; Nahum; Habakkuk 2; Zephaniah 2; Genesis 41:37-45; 42:6; 45:8-9, 26; Exodus 8:1

2. New Testament examples

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

Lk 3:18-20: So with many other exhortations he 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.

Ac 24:24-25: 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 (*dialegomenou*, pres participle of *dialegomai*) 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."

3. Why did God include Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14?

Ro 13:1-7: 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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 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. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

1 Pe 2:13-14: Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

4. The responsibility of citizens in a democracy to understand the Bible's teaching

B. Examples from church history: Christian influence on secular governments

- When the church forgot Jesus' teaching about the distinction between "the things that are Caesar's" and "the things that are God's," it made harmful mistakes

- In spite of these mistakes, there are many examples of the positive results of significant Christian influence on governments (i.e., a greater value on human rights; freedom of religion; equality before the law; the abolition of abortion, infanticide, human sacrifice, polygamy, and slavery; granting protections, property rights, and voting rights to women) – see list under “Wrong View 4” above

5. Without Christian influence, governments will have no clear moral compass

- What would happen in the following areas if all Christian influence on government were suddenly removed?
 - War
 - Transgender advocacy
 - Same-sex marriage
 - Abortion
 - Pornography
 - Poverty
 - Taxes and economic growth
 - Education
 - Energy
 - Religious freedom, rights of conscience
 - Relentless erosion of personal freedoms by ever-expanding government control of life
- If Christians do not speak publicly about moral and ethical issues facing a nation, then who will?
- It is healthy for Christians to have a dialogue about what the Bible teaches about moral standards for human conduct
- Eventually, significant Christian influence on government will result in many positive changes

6. The responsibility of pastors to teach on these issues

- God calls people to different tasks in the overall work of his kingdom; God calls some to be involved heavily in the political process, and others to sing in a church choir; He calls some to run for office, and others to teach a Sunday School class
- Pastors have a special responsibility to preach and teach from God’s Word on at least some issues affecting law, government, and politics, even though some of these topics are “controversial”
- Most people will only become active in influencing government in ways their pastor teaches them to be active
- Paul thought he was accountable to God to preach on everything the Bible taught

Ac 20:26-27: Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

7. The obligations of all Christian citizens

- a. The obligation to be informed and to vote
- b. Is there an obligation to do more than to vote?

8. Churches and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines

- The IRS prohibit pastors or churches from explicitly saying they support or oppose any candidate by name, though they are still allowed to take positions on moral issues that are a part of an election campaign
- To this point, the IRS has never revoked the tax-exempt status of any church for preaching such a sermon and actually naming and endorsing or opposing specific candidates

9. Conclusion

- Pastors have some responsibility to teach about significant moral issues at stake in each election
- Individual Christians have an obligation to be well-informed and to vote intelligently
- Christians should also consider whether God is calling them to do more