

Lesson 9

Christians and the State

I. Introduction:

In his Templeton Prize address Alexander Solzhenitsyn said: “Over half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’ Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by the upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’”¹

- A. Why does a state have a tendency to drift towards totalitarianism when its citizens and leadership forget God?

- B. Should Christians work to wed church and state in an attempt to guarantee that men will not forget God?

- C. In general how should Christians relate to the government?

As Christians we live in two worlds. While citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we are also residents on earth. How we are to live in both worlds has been the source and substance of much debate. Some Christians from a postmillennial perspective believe that we must Christianize the world to prepare for the return of Christ. “The saints must prepare to take over the world’s government and its courts.”² Other Christians from a premillennial perspective believe that this political transformation can only occur when Jesus returns. This has led to some extreme positions. Norman Geisler reports “A famous contemporary premillennial evangelist quips that he has no time to clean up the cesspool because he is too busy fishing (for souls) in it.”³ These two examples illustrate the two extremes of political

¹Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 383

²Rousas J. Rushdoony, “Government and the Christians,” *The Rutherford Institute* 1 (July-August 1884): 7.

³Norman L. Geisler “A Premillennial View of Law and Government” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:567 (Jul. 85) p. 254.

activism and in-activism as well as raise a host of questions about the extent of our political involvement.

With this backdrop this study will attempt to inform, instruct, and clarify how Christians can maintain sterling citizenship both in heaven and in this world.

II. The Purpose of Government:

As mentioned in previous studies the Old Testament civil statues while helpful do not apply to modern day Christians. The Mosaic Law Code is wonderful and educational, but God designed it for a different people with a different purpose. With the death of Christ, all of the Mosaic Law has been placed on hold. But even before His death, we see how the Scriptures adjust the Mosaic Law as the Jews are in exile. When Israel was exiled **Daniel chapters 2 and 7** indicate that God has given dominion to the Gentile powers until the Son of Man comes in all His glory.⁴ This hiatus will end when Jesus returns He will set up an absolute monarchy where He will rule the world with justice, benevolence, and righteousness. Until then God subjects Christians to the Law of Christ which supports the legitimacy of a pagan government.

A. Matthew 22:17-22

In **Matthew 22:15-22** the Pharisees laid a trap for Jesus, asking Him whether or not the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar. An affirmative answer would make Him most unpopular with Jewish nationalists desperate to break away from Rome, while a negative answer would prompt charges of treason, giving His enemies legitimate grounds to have Him arrested. Never one to be outwitted, Jesus asks them to produce a coin. Roman coinage, like our Lincoln pennies today, bore the likeness of the emperor as well as an inscription about his divinity. The Jews considered this to be blasphemous, for it was a graven image paying homage to someone other than Yahweh.

“Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?”¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?¹⁹ “Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius.²⁰ And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”²¹ They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things

⁴Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 385

*that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."*²² *And hearing this, they were amazed, and leaving Him, they went away.*

1. How does Jesus answer His accusers?
2. From Jesus' perspective, does the state have a right to make certain demands from its citizens? Why or why not?
3. How can a Christian in good conscience serve both God and the State?

In response Jesus surprised His accusers by commanding them to give to Caesar the things that were Caesar's—in this case, the coins which bore his image—and to give to God the things that are God's. Thus men, who are made in the very image of God, must humbly present themselves to Him.

Key Principles:

1. Jesus makes it clear that it is okay for the government to demand certain obligations from its citizens (i.e. taxes).
2. Jesus draws a distinction between the things of the government and the things of God. Giving to the government is not stealing from the Lord. Citizens must fulfill their duty to the government *and* sacrificially give to the Lord.

- B. **John 19:10-11:** While on trial for crimes He did not commit, Jesus stands face to face with Pilate the Roman procurator of Judea.

*So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"*¹¹ *Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."*

1. According to Jesus, what was the source of Pilate's authority? How might this contrast with how Pilate would have answered Jesus' statement?
2. In light of this why did Jesus submit to Pilate's authority?

Key Principle: The government's authority has been delegated by the Lord.

- C. **Romans 13:1-7:** In the previous and following chapters Paul describes the new life of the Christian. In this text he works out some of the practical implications. As he does so he gives us some of the most important teachings with regards to government in the New Testament.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.³ For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

1. According to *verses 1 and 2* what is our responsibility to the government and upon what basis?
2. What is the function of the government according to *verses 3 and 4*?
3. What additional motivation does *verse 5* present for obeying the government?
4. According to *verses 6 and 7* what should be our obligation to the government and upon what basis?

Key Principles:

1. Christians submit to the government because it has been established by God. This does not mean that God is pleased with every action, but that He vests the government with His authority.

2. The function of the state is to dispense justice to evil doers and workers of wickedness.
3. Our obedience to our government must move beyond our fear of punishment to our conscience.
4. Rulers serve God and deserve to be remunerated with taxes, customs, and honor.

D. *1 Timothy 2:1-3*: After denouncing the idle speculations of the false teachers Paul expounds upon what it means to live out the gospel. As he does so, he calls for the Saints to pray.

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.³ This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,

1. For whom are we to pray and why (vv. 1-2)?
2. How can our government help us to preach, proclaim, and live the gospel? For instance how would civil unrest and war hinder our ability to preach the gospel, build up the church, etc.?

Key Principles:

1. God commands Christians to pray for their government.
2. The government can be a blessing when they allow Christians to live tranquil lives which facilitate spiritual growth.

E. *1 Peter 2:13-17*: In this passage Peter explains how believers can live in a world that rejects their message. Thus, he emphasizes our duty to live in a way which brings glory and honor to God.

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.¹⁵ For such is the will of God that by doing right

you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. ¹⁶ Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

1. What motivates our submission to earthly authorities (v. 13)?
2. According to *verse 14* what is the function of our government?
3. What is the rationale for our obedience (v. 15)? What kind of accusations would our obedience to the government silence?
4. How does submission to the government demonstrate love to our neighbors?

Key Principles:

1. We should submit to the government for the Lord's sake.
2. The function of government is to reward good and punish evil.
3. Our obedience silences the accusation that Christians are subversive to the social and governmental order.

The New Testament teaching basically enjoins Christians to submit to the powers that be to promote a tranquil and peaceful society. This societal serenity will help Christians pursue their goals of church edification, spiritual growth, and worldwide evangelism. Yet, as we will find out, obedience does not mandate that we ignore God given tasks or remain silent on moral issues which threaten and harm our society.

III. Christians and Political Engagement:

A. Modern History:

In 1978 the formation of the Moral Majority ignited Christian involvement in the United States. Led by Robert Grant and Jerry Falwell this movement mobilized conservative Christians to advocate and vote for issues consistent with a Christian conception of the law. Such issues included:

- Outlawing abortion:
- Opposition to state recognition of homosexual acts.

- Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.
- Enforcement of a traditional vision of family life.
- Censorship of media outlets that promote an “anti-family” agenda.

Credited with delivering the 1980 presidential election to Reagan, the Moral Majority began to decline in influence after a Memphis reporter – Mike Clark – penned a Pulitzer Prize nominated exposé regarding the movement’s influence on the Republican Party.⁵

In the 1988 religious broadcaster and political commentator Pat Robertson teamed with PhD candidate Ralph Reed to form the Christian Coalition. From 1989 to 1997 the Christian Coalition wielded a sizable influence. Ralph Reed became the “Christian” face to the media landing on the cover of *Time*. In addition, the Christian Coalition in many locales controlled or heavily influenced many districts where the Religious Right could be counted on as a solid voting bloc. Their voting guides were distributed to 40 million through Churches which demonstrates the scope of this organization. Yet, its influence receded with charges of financial impropriety against Reed.⁶

In 2000 evangelicals celebrated as one of their own – George W. Bush – came to power. When Bush prevailed in 2004 in a hard fought political campaign, many pundits conceded that evangelicals in Ohio and Florida swung the election towards the Republican candidate. Emboldened by their influence Christian leaders such as James Dobson sought to exert greater political influence to protect the lives of the unborn and outlaw homosexual marriage.

1. Why do many believe that Christians should actively seek to influence and shape the policies of the United States Government?
2. What are some of the dangers of such an activist priority?

B. Arguments Against Engagement:

To be fair, not all who advocate these arguments believe in complete disengagement. But these arguments are used and can be used to advance the notion that Christians should disengage in politics altogether.

1. **You Must Choose Your Kingdom:** No man can be a servant of two masters for he will love the one and hate the other. Since the Bible clearly teaches that we are

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_majority

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Coalition_of_America

- citizens of the heavenly kingdom (*Phi. 3:20*) we should disengage in the affairs of the earthly realm. To state it more strongly, allegiance to this earthly kingdom is tantamount to treason against God.
2. **Our Chief Responsibility is Evangelism:** Obedience to the Great Commission leaves little time to trifle with the affairs of this world. Besides, the best way to change society is to lead individuals to Christ.
 3. **Christian Ethics are for Christians and do not Apply to the World of Political Power.** Secular society which hates God has little interest in legislating biblical morality. Such efforts are futile and our money should be spent elsewhere.
 4. **Politics is dirty business.** Consider the downfall of the Moral Majority and the sordid career of Christian Coalition founder Ralph Reed for more details.
 5. **Dangerous Ecumenism:** Since the only way of having genuine hope for change is to vote in bloc with other believers. Such an activity may lead us to compromise some of our doctrinal commitments uniting us with denominations which we would otherwise oppose theologically (i.e. Mormons).
 6. **Christ Will Return Soon.** Therefore we must get busy with the business of the kingdom.⁷
 7. **God's Sovereignty:** By looking to human means to reform society and establish Christian values, we have denigrated God's sovereignty over human history and events.
 8. **Pursuit of Comfort:** Seeking to bring biblical values to our culture by changing it through fleshly means is a selfish pursuit. The truth is, God never intended for us to be at ease with our culture.
 9. **Phariseeism:** By trying to establish Christian values through earthly methods, we risk creating a false sense of morality . . . pursuing outward change at the expense of inward transformation is both a nearsighted and deadly choice.

⁷Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 392

10. **We Make Unnecessary Enemies:** By making activism our priority, we fashion a reputation as rabble-rousing malcontents and foster hostility toward unbelievers that alienates us from them and them from us.⁸

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this position?

C. Arguments For Engagement:

1. **God Keeps us Here in this World:** With regards to choosing our kingdom Jesus did not ask the Father to take believers out of the world. As previously taught the Son of God had no problem paying taxes to Caesar. It is appropriate to give honor to whom honor is due, and paying taxes to the emperor does not denigrate loyalty to God. In addition the political process can be used to right wrongs and fight injustice. We can love our unborn neighbors by fighting for their right to live (*Matt. 22:39*).
2. **Political Engagement does not necessarily hinder our gospel witness:** As to preaching the gospel, this must be a priority. But commitment to gospel preaching does not necessarily mandate societal disengagement. For instance, people still need to make a living. In addition, this was mindset was not modeled by Jesus Christ. Consider the following:

In Jesus' day there were four basic models of interaction with the world that he might have adopted, but he adopted none of them. The Sadducean option totally subordinated the things of God to the state. The Roman government appointed and controlled the Jewish high priest at will. Second, there was the Essene approach of withdrawal from society to await messianic intervention. A third approach was that of the Zealots who openly revolted against Rome. They relied on the sword and expected divine intervention on their behalf. Finally, there was the Pharisaic option. They lived in the world but tried to be separate from it by adhering to rules that covered externals. Jesus rejected all of these options.²² Instead, he was in the world but not of it. Unlike the Pharisees, his separation was not merely external. He rejected the philosophies and values of the world in favor of heavenly principles, but that kept him neither from proclaiming the gospel nor from meeting people's needs.⁹

⁸ John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You* (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000 p. viii-ix

²² Frank Stagg, "Rendering to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar: Christian Engagement with the World," *J Ch St* 18 (Winter 1978): 97-102.

⁹Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 393

3. **Christian ethics are not simply for Christians:** Since they have been established by the Creator of the Universe they apply to all creation. The decreasing ability of non-Christians to obey His standards does not excuse them from responsibility.

4. **Anticipation of the Lord's Return is no justification for withdrawal from the World:** Jesus makes it clear that no one knows the hour or the day. In the mean time we are called to be salt and light to society. Our influence should benefit and bless fellow citizens of our country. In addition, we should seek to protect our ability to proclaim the gospel. Though suffering may be the mechanism God has in store for us, Paul still desired for a peace and tranquility which would facilitate the spread of the Word (*1 Tim. 2:1-3*).

5. **Examples in the Bible:** Throughout the Bible we see numerous instances of God's people assuming significant positions of leadership in pagan government. Joseph, Daniel, Mordecai, and Esther are well known examples. In addition, Jesus commended the faith of a Roman Centurion (*Matt. 8:10*) and did not demand that Zacchaeus – a local tax official – leave his post.

6. **Our Duty as Citizens:** The privileges of living in a democracy warrant greater responsibility to work within the system to bring about changes for good. In addition, as citizens of a democracy we are technically the rulers. Thus, we should benevolently exercise the power given to us for the good of our country.
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of this position?

D. Mix of Both:

It is obvious that activist Christianity can easily sidetrack the church from its main mission of reaching the lost. In addition, the fervor and passion which Christians seem to maintain for politics often does not carry over to a passion to build up the church. At the same time, it is a reach to argue that one *cannot* be engaged in government and the mission of the church concurrently. In fact much good can be brought about by such interaction. With this said, I believe that the church should be salt and light to society, but must have a limited role in doing so. The church can engage society and bring change through three significant activities:

1. **A Prophetic Role:** The church can serve as the conscience of society by pointing out evil and injustice. Also when appropriate we must speak against the state when it tolerates the evils of society. In America, the role of the church in seeking the abolition of slavery serves as a prime example of this kind of role.
2. **A Strategic Role:** In situations when change can only come about by a corporate effort, it may be beneficial for the church to mobilize itself for the good of society. For instance, if there was a possibility of saving unborn children through a vote, love for our unborn neighbors would compel us to collectively join forces to save lives.
3. **A Helpful Role:** The church can offer practical help for people caught in moral dilemmas. For instance, we can give help to pregnant teenagers contemplating an abortion. We can also service the poor with love and compassion. The church should do this because unlike the government, we can freely preach the gospel to those who turn to us for assistance instead of the state.
 - a. Should Christians care about such issues as sales tax increases?
 - b. How can we know if we have placed too much emphasis on political activism?
 - c. How can we know if we are not active enough in our society?

IV. Civil Disobedience:

- While the church can impact society for good, what should we do when society does not seem to respond to our efforts? Is there a time when we should do more than political activism to mandate change?

A. A Case Study:

On July 29, 1994, Paul Jennings Hill – a former Presbyterian Pastor - approached a Pensacola, Florida abortion clinic with which he was familiar. When he spotted physician John Britton and his clinic escort, James Barrett, outside, he shot them both at close range with a shotgun. In addition to the two murders, Hill seriously wounded Barrett's wife, Joan. He was arrested that same day.¹⁰

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Jennings_Hill

1. How could Paul Hill justify his actions?

2. Do you agree? Why or why not?

In his own words Paul defended his decision to assassinate a notorious abortion doctor.

- *This would put the pro-life rhetoric about defending born and unborn children equally into practice.*
- *It would bear witness to the full humanity of the unborn as nothing else could.*
- *It would also open the people's eyes to the enormous consequences of abortion - not only for the unborn, but also for the government that had sanctioned it and for those who are required to resist it.*
- *This would convict millions of people of their past neglect and spur many to future obedience.*
- *I also realized that this would help to force people to decide whether they would join the battle in defense of abortionists or side with their intended victims.*
- ***But most importantly, I realized that this would uphold the truth of the Gospel at the precise point of Satan's current attack (the abortionist's knife).***¹¹

With this said, does the Bible support the actions of Paul Hill.

B. Biblical Examples:

Throughout the Bible we have numerous examples of disobedience. Consider the following:

1. ***Daniel 3:15-18*** “Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?”¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.”¹⁷ “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us

¹¹ <http://www.armyofgod.com/PHillonepage.html>

from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.¹⁸ “But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

- What command do Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego disobey and why?
2. *Daniel 6:8-10 “Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked.”⁹ Therefore King Darius signed the document, that is, the injunction.¹⁰ Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.*
- What command Daniel disobey and why?
3. *Acts 4:18-20 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.¹⁹ But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge;²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*
- What command did Peter and John disobey and why?
4. Can the above actions justify breaking the law (i.e. trespassing on an abortion clinic) to prevent a state sanctioned evil?
5. Why is it significant that each of the above examples submitted to the consequences of their disobedience?
6. In general, how did the biblical examples respect the law? How is this consistent with the teaching of *Romans 13:1-7* and *1 Peter 2:13-17*?

7. In light of the above when is it permissible to break the law?

Note: *The basic biblical approach is that believers, rather than retaliating against those who persecute them, should follow Christ's example (cf. 1 Pet 2:21–23; 3:10–12). The oft-quoted comment of Jesus about bringing a sword (Matt 10:34–36) has nothing to do with Jesus' relation to the political structure; it emphasizes the dramatic impact discipleship has on personal relationships. Moreover, biblical examples of people disobeying civil authority in order to obey God do not include the use of violence in defying the authorities. While examples are not prescriptive, they do suggest that one can protest and even disobey governmental policy without violence and still make an impact on the social order. We conclude, then, that the basic biblical perspective excludes violence as the way for Christians to effect social change.¹²*

V. Conclusion:

A Christian's involvement with society involves much wisdom and discretion. While we are called to be salt and light in society political activism is not the only way to do so. We must seek the Lord through much prayer and trust that we will have the discernment to decide between better and best. All the while we should remember our dual citizenship. Christians are members of two kingdoms the earthly and the heavenly. While we should never lose focus of our heavenly kingdom, it is worth entertaining how we can use our earthly citizenship to advance our heavenly goals.

¹²Feinberg, John S. ; Feinberg, Paul D. ; Huxley, Aldous: *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1996, c1993, S. 405