

Is God a Republican or a Democrat?



Session 1



Mark 12:13-17

Session Objective

Participants will explore the belief that government is a gift from God, regardless of whether we always agree with a particular political view. While government is a gift from God, God is above and beyond all attempts to define God.

Faith Statement

Magistracy of every kind is instituted by God himself for the peace and tranquility of the human race, and thus it should have the chief place in the world.
— Second Helvetic Confession (5.252)

Session Overview

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For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

How interested and involved in politics are you? We live in highly partisan times, and political views have a way of spilling over into all parts of life: the people we socialize with, which media we pay attention to, even where we go to church! Of course, political tensions have existed for as long as human society has been organized, and certainly there was much political strife in Palestine, as part of the Roman Empire, in Jesus' day.

Read Mark 12:13–17, in which Jesus' adversaries try to trap him into claiming that it's against God's law to pay taxes to pagan Rome (which would amount to treason against the state). Then reflect on these questions:

- What do you think Jesus' answer (v. 17) says about where our loyalties ought to lie?
- How does God's claim on your life relate to your life as a citizen?
- Do the demands of citizenship ever conflict with the responsibilities of faith? When or if that happens, how do you decide what to do?

Pray for the youth you'll be leading through this session as they navigate the treacherous waters of growing into both adulthood and mature citizenship.



Understanding the Scripture

The events described in Mark 12:13–17 take place during the final days leading up to Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–11), and his adversaries are ramping up their attacks on him and his authority. In Mark 12:13–17, they send some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap Jesus in his words. (No one is sure exactly who the "Herodians" were, but the implication is that the Pharisees were engaged in some sort of conspiracy with Roman authorities.)

The trap in the question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" lies in the fact that if Jesus says yes, he'll offend his fellow Jews because Rome was a pagan government. If he says no, he'll be guilty of treason against the state. On one level, Jesus' answer—"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's"—is a clever way of avoiding the trap. But Jesus isn't just being wishy-washy; he's also making a powerful statement about how the dual roles of citizen and servant of God fit together.

Jesus' response affirms that his followers can't just withdraw from the world and live a purely "spiritual" life; they must also take part in the political process of the place in which they live, no matter what the religious orientation (or lack thereof) of the government might be. At the same time, Jesus isn't placing the realms of God and the emperor into two separate but equal spheres. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," yes, but even the emperor and his things ultimately belong to God. Whenever there are conflicting loyalties, God must be the one whom we serve and to whom we turn.



Understanding the Faith Statement

Unlike most of our church's confessions, the Second Helvetic Confession was written not by a committee but by one man, the Swiss pastor Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). He originally wrote it as a personal statement, but he decided to publish it (in 1566) to help reconcile conflicted factions within the Protestant church in Germany.

The Second Helvetic Confession is quite long and deals with all of the major theological topics of Christian faith. Its final chapter is devoted to the magistracy (i.e., government). As the *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* observes, "For us who live in a democratic society that is committed to freedom of religion and the separation of church and state, it is out of date in taking for granted . . . that all governments are ruled by kings and princes who do what God has ordained them to do when they support—and enforce—true preaching of the gospel."¹ Still, this confession is consistent with the Reformed tradition's emphasis, even today, on the importance of government and the responsibility of Christians to be good citizens.

In this regard, assuming we substitute *government* for *magistracy*, the faith statement for this session couldn't be clearer.



Teaching Today's Question

Ask the question "Is God a Republican or a Democrat?" in a crowded room and you'll likely get multiple answers: *a Republican, a Democrat, both, and neither!* In our more rational moments, we trust that God is above the partisan bickering of our politics; still, when we hold strong views about particular issues, we can't help but believe—or at least hope—that God is on *our* side.

Christian teenagers, immersed in media-driven American culture, are as likely as any of us to develop strong political leanings and to seek to reconcile their political and religious beliefs. However, as relative newcomers to political issues and the critical thinking required to analyze and synthesize them, youth can use some guidance in making sense of it all.

In leading this session, you can offer some of that guidance by sticking close to the concepts expressed in the session objective:

1. Government is a gift from God, regardless of its ideology, but
2. God is above and beyond all human attempts at defining God's political views.

An understanding of these concepts, while not providing the simple answers that we all crave, will help young people begin to see the importance of faithful civic engagement. To this end, guide the young people in seeing that God cannot be limited to one political party and that God is at work in multiple political parties.

1. Introduction to the Second Helvetic Confession, in the *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 90.



Enter

Option A: Who Am I?

- Self-adhesive name tags, markers

As participants arrive, ask them to write the name of a well-known political figure on a name tag without letting anyone see. Have the participants stick their name tags onto someone else's back so that each person has a name tag.

Have participants try to guess the names on their backs by moving around the meeting space and asking each other yes/no questions. (For example, *Has this person ever been president of the United States?*). Participants must ask each person in the group a question before they can ask a person a second question. When participants correctly guess the name, have them take the name tag off their backs, attach it to the front of their shirt, and continue to answer questions from others. Continue to play until all participants have guessed their identities.

Explain that this session and the next three will focus on politics and how politics and Christian faith fit together.

Option B: Graffiti Sheets

- Newsprint, markers

Before the session, write these questions on separate sheets of posted newsprint:

- How do you feel about politics in general?
- Throughout history, who is the United States' most important political figure?
- Who is your favorite U.S. political figure?
- Who is your least favorite U.S. political figure?
- What does the Democratic Party stand for?
- What does the Republican Party stand for?

As participants arrive, distribute markers and invite them to write responses to the questions on the posted sheets of newsprint. When all are finished, review the responses together. Explain that this session and the next three will focus on politics and how politics and Christian faith fit together.

If you anticipate your group having a hard time thinking of the names of political figures, consider creating a set of name tags in advance and attaching them to participants' backs as they arrive.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, “Is God a Republican or a Democrat?” Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question, or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- How interested are you in politics?
- Would you characterize your political beliefs as strongly held, wishy-washy, or somewhere in between? How did they become that way?
- What do the terms *Republican Party* and *Democratic Party* mean to you, in terms of the respective political beliefs of each party?
- In what ways do these political parties and their members reflect or express religious values?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Holy God, we live in crazy partisan times. Politicians with differing agendas attack each other, and—at times—try to lay claim to your endorsement. As we gather in this place of peace for this time of study and reflection, reveal to us your priorities and your will, so that we might follow in your way above all. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Option B: Living in an Occupied Land



Copies of “Song Lyrics” (Web Resource 1 a), recording of “Peter (What I Said)” by David LaMotte, music player

Distribute copies of “Song Lyrics” (Web Resource 1 a). Listen together to the recording of “Peter (What I Said)” while participants follow the lyrics on the page. Discuss the following questions:



- What is your overall impression of the song?
- In the song, the speaker is Jesus; what is the occasion in which Peter has drawn a sword? (*Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26:47–56 and Luke 22:47–53*)
- Jesus, as imagined in the song, says, “We live in this occupied land/ Where the Romans can kill us at random.” But later he says, “God bless the children of Abraham/God bless the Romans who reign/ God bless the peacemakers and warriors/Who each think the other insane.” What does this suggest about Jesus’ relationship to the powers that be?

Explain that the political situation as described in the song—Jerusalem and Palestine living under Roman occupation—is an important factor underlying the Scripture passage for this session. Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

This section provides two learning options for exploring how this session's Scripture passage and faith statement respond to the question "Is God a Republican or a Democrat?" Option A focuses on the Scripture passage and is a straightforward Bible study. Option B deals with both the Scripture passage and the faith statement and provides a more interactive approach to the question.

Option A: A Question of Priorities

Bibles, copies of "Script" (Web Resource 1b) and "Session 1 Discussion Questions" (Web Resource 1c)

Make sure each participant has a Bible, and have participants read Mark 12:13–17 silently. Then have them act out the passage together, using the script found on "Script" (Web Resource 1b). Make sure participants have a general understanding of the situation, any unfamiliar terms, and the characters involved by summarizing the passage together.

Form groups of two or three. Give each group a copy of "Session 1 Discussion Questions" (Web Resource 1c) and have the participants discuss the questions on the page. When all are finished, give the groups an opportunity to report their responses to the final question, "How does Mark 12:13–17 help you respond to the question *Is God a Republican or a Democrat?*"

Option B: Who's the Chief?

Bibles, newsprint, markers

Before the session, write *The Question* at the top of a posted sheet of newsprint and *The Answer* about halfway down the same sheet. On a separate sheet, write the faith statement for this session (see page 3).

Make sure each participant has a Bible. Have participants read Mark 12:13–17 silently, and then have a volunteer read the passage out loud to the group. Make sure participants have a general understanding of the situation, any unfamiliar terms, and the characters involved by summarizing the passage together.

Have participants work together to restate the question that Jesus' opponents ask him (v. 14) and the answer that Jesus gives (v. 17). Have a volunteer write the restated question and answer on the prepared sheet of newsprint. Make sure the participants understand why Jesus' answer "utterly amazed" his opponents (v. 17) by discussing the following questions:



- How does Jesus' answer help him avoid the trap set by his opponents?
- Does Jesus' answer mean that God and the emperor are equals? Why or why not? In your view, how do the emperor's "things" relate to God's "things"?
- If you were ever placed in the situation of having to choose loyalty to the government over loyalty to God, how might Jesus' words help you decide what to do?

Call the participants' attention to the posted faith statement and explain that *magistracy* simply means "government." Read the faith statement together and explore the following questions:



- What does the phrase "of every kind" imply? What does this mean for different forms of government, such as democracies, monarchies, and dictatorships? What does this mean for U.S. government controlled by Republicans or Democrats?
- What does the phrase "the chief place" imply? Does this statement conflict with Jesus' words in Mark 12:17? Why or why not?
- How does Mark 12:13–17 and this faith statement help you respond to the question *Is God a Republican or a Democrat?*



Express



Consider filming the skits and putting them on your congregation's website.

Option A: Television or Internet Ads

Form groups of four or five. Have each group create and present a sixty-second skit that depicts a television or Internet advertisement that responds to the question "Is God a Republican or a Democrat?" Encourage participants to use information and insight that they've gained so far in this session in their skits. If possible, have the participants present the skits to other groups in your congregation.

Option B: Limited Response



Paper, pens

Some social networking websites limit posts to 140 characters. Have participants work together to create a 140-character response to the question "Is God a Republican or a Democrat?" Encourage participants to use information and insight that they've gained so far in this session in their response. If possible, publish the response in your congregation's newsletter or on your congregation's website.

Option C: Making Music

Form groups of two or three. Have each group create and present a song or rap that responds to the question “Is God a Republican or a Democrat?” To simplify this activity, consider having groups rewrite the words to familiar tunes, such as the theme song to a popular television show or a hymn that everyone knows. If possible, have the participants present the songs or raps to other groups in your congregation or film the songs and raps and put them on your congregation’s website.

Option D: Film Clip—*Bonhoeffer*

Bonhoeffer (2003, not rated) and movie-viewing equipment

Before the session, preview this clip from *Bonhoeffer*: 22:22–30:45. This is chapter 4, beginning with a quotation from Romans 13:1–2 and ending with part of an interview with one of Bonhoeffer’s students, Otto Dudzes.

Introduce the film clip: *Bonhoeffer* is a documentary about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor and a leader of the resistance against Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party prior to and during World War II. This clip discusses the way in which Hitler’s rise to power was viewed as Germany’s “salvation” and the submission of German churches to Nazi power.

Watch the clip together before exploring the following questions:



- In speeches, Hitler claimed that God was engineering his rise to power and the salvation of the German people through the Nazi government. Though Hitler and the Nazis exist in a despicable class by themselves, in what ways do politicians continue to use God to further their own agenda?
- Bishop Wolfgang Huber says of the Nazi version of God, “This was a completely ideological God”—that is, a God who was firmly on Hitler’s side. The German church even preached that Hitler’s rule was blessed by God. Why would the church endorse Hitler in this way? Do churches in the United States ever endorse candidates for office?
- Regarding a ceremony in which Hitler used a church building to proclaim the establishment of a new nation built on traditional values, the narrator says, “There is no doubt that a great many church people fell for this. They wanted to have this kind of leadership. They were desperately anxious to get the church back into the mainstream of national life.” Why do you think the German church was so anxious about this? What did the people of the church want? What advantage could an American church have, if any, by aligning itself with either the Republican Party or Democratic Party?

- Bonhoeffer’s former student Otto Dudzes says, “We heard from everywhere that our salvation was now in the hands of Adolph Hitler. But Bonhoeffer taught us that salvation came from Christ alone.” In what ways does Bonhoeffer’s teaching influence your thinking about God’s political preferences? Clearly, God is not a Nazi—but could God still be, in your view, a Republican or a Democrat?



A Visit to Barmen

- Copies of “Barmen Declaration Litany” (Web Resource 1d)

Lead the group in a brief closing worship using the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Explain to participants that the declaration was composed by a group of Christian pastors and teachers in 1934 as a protest against the Nazi party’s takeover of the established church. In resisting Adolph Hitler and the nationalization of the church, these Christians, led by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoller, and others, were putting their lives and livelihoods at great risk. The Theological Declaration of Barmen declares that Jesus Christ alone—not the nation or any political party—is Lord of all and head of the church.

Distribute copies of “Barmen Declaration Litany” (Web Resource 1d). Assign a leader and two reading groups. Read the litany together and then pray the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

We give you thanks, loving God, for the gifts of government, society, and nation. Help us to remember, though, that you are above all—that no individual or political party can lay claim to your special favor. Lead us to proclaim that the question is not whether you are on our side, but whether we are on your side. Through the One who is Lord of All. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions that families can talk about after each of the four sessions in this course. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Book Club Connections

Read together some or all of Jim Wallis’s *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006). Wallis argues that both conservatives and liberals—Republicans and Democrats—miss the point concerning the role and place of faith in public life, and he lays out a vision for a new understanding of faith and politics in the United States.

Media Connections

As a group, sample a variety of Republican- and Democratic-leaning media outlets (such as television networks, websites, and blogs), and then compare and analyze the findings. Encourage the participants to watch, listen, and/or read critically and then to compare what they find with their own views, as informed by their faith.