

The Church and Politics

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The Bible and Politics

Scripture

Matthew 26:47–55 Jesus condemns the way of the sword.

Matthew 22:15–22 Jesus distinguishes between the things of God and the things of the emperor.

Romans 13:1–7 Paul explains that government authorities are instituted by God.

Jeremiah 22 Jeremiah delivers the Word of the Lord, a call for justice and a warning against oppression.

Acts 5:29 Peter and the apostles declare their obedience to God over and against any human authority.

Prayer

Gracious and mighty God, we give you thanks for this opportunity to study and discern your will for our lives and for our communities. Make us mindful of how we might faithfully follow your will in all life, including politics and government. Grace us with the patience and courage to treat each other with respect as we seek to test our convictions and better understand those of others. Amen.

Introduction

Congratulations for making it this far. I'm joking, but only partly. Politics is a topic that many churches, pastors, and parishioners work hard to avoid, and who can blame them? Friendships and careers have been ended over nothing more than talk of politics. Many Americans are divided into opposing camps, and so we have good cause to be concerned that talking about politics at church will divide our congregation. After all, we've seen this happen within denominations, congregations, and even families.

A study on politics may seem like the last thing we need, but then again, if you're making time to read this you may be wondering if there isn't a better way to do politics. If so, you are like Reformed Christians who, since their origins, have been keenly interested in issues of governance, asking how God would have us govern our communities.

Today, however, this sort of question often sparks anxieties. An increasing number of Americans see such questions as divisive or even threatening. To ask how our faith in God relates to politics is for many part of a larger effort to use politics to force one's religious convictions on others.

Religion, such critics insist, functions best when it is kept safely in the private world of individuals and their congregations. This view is shared by many who consider themselves deeply religious. Of course, this is not the only religious perspective on politics. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who insist that God calls us to make our politics a confessional or Christian politics. A third and still different view claims that politics is a hopelessly worldly enterprise that ought to be strongly criticized. Still others insist that Christians should be actively engaged in our secular political system.

Our task is to make sense of these conflicting positions. The first place Reformed Christians tend to turn, of course, is the Bible. So it follows that our first real question is: What does the Bible say about politics?

The Politics of Peace

Christians have always claimed we should look to Jesus for guidance on how to live a good and faithful life. On the other hand, we Christians are infamous for our ability to ignore Jesus. A Reformed perspective cannot be Reformed and overlook Jesus and what he teaches us about politics.

In the Gospels, we do not find a statement of democratic political theory but instead several religiously inspired narrations of Jesus' life and teachings. Here Christians have emphasized many different aspects: Jesus' acts of healing and teaching, his humble birth, and his death and resurrection. Many of us believe strongly that the death of Jesus is crucial for our salvation. But how often do we consider that his death might also be crucial for how we live, even in terms of our politics? Should we make anything of Jesus' dying under the rule of Caesar and at the hands of Roman soldiers? Historians have taught us that the Romans crucified individuals they considered threats to their reign. In light of this, was Jesus a revolutionary? If so, what kind of revolutionary? Perhaps he was a democratic resistor against a tyrannical empire or an agitator seeking to inspire and lead an insurrection against a foreign and oppressive occupying power.

As we pursue this line of thought, we are bound to run across the fact that if Jesus is presented as a revolutionary, it is as a very

different kind of revolutionary. Most startlingly, Jesus dies not in violent resistance to the Romans but in an apparent intentional embrace of death. Moreover, his death seems less about the Romans (and overthrowing them) than about something bigger, more cosmic in scope.

The peacefulness of Jesus is surely instructive for our way of life. Consider that Jesus ends up crucified by the Roman Empire, yet he seems anything but a violent agitator. Indeed, he embodies and teaches reconciliation between enemies. When he speaks or acts as Judge he does so without violence. He teaches his followers to love and pray for their enemies. Jesus refuses the way of violence to the very end. Matthew 26 reports a scene in which Jesus' followers appear ready to act forcibly to intervene on his behalf. "Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear." Jesus refuses the offer and even rebukes his would-be defender. "Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.'"

What should we make of this? Jesus appears resolutely opposed to violence. If so, perhaps we have a clear and authoritative politics, a politics of Jesus. Our politics, in whatever form it takes, should be peaceful. To follow the Prince of Peace is to live a life of peace and practice a politics of peace, even to the point of resistance to one's nation. Indeed, if we are schooled in a way of peace, shouldn't we expect to be viewed with suspicion and perhaps despised, even persecuted? The politics of Jesus is not a revolutionary politics in the conventional sense. Instead, it is revolutionary in its obedience to Christ and its resistance to the violence of the state.

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The Politics of Obedience

While all Christians agree the lives of Christ's followers should be marked by the pursuit of peace, many Christians claim that peace is a way of life, not an approach to politics. The reasons for this vary, but for many Christians, politics is seen as a separate sphere from the life of faith, yet one nevertheless governed by God.

Critics of this distinction claim it is a capitulation to modern thinking in which the different arenas of life are separated from one another and given their own autonomy. Defenders argue this kind of thinking is much older than modernity, that it originates in fact with Jesus. An oft-cited Scripture is the story of Jesus' being tested by Pharisees and Herodians who want to know if he thinks it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Jesus sees through their scheming and asks to see the coin used for the tax. Matthew reports that "they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'" (Matthew 22:15–22).

These words call not for resistance to the state but for fulfilling one's obligations. Pacifist and non-pacifist Christians alike can agree with this last statement, while disagreeing about what exactly is owed the state. For the non-pacifist Christian, the crucial point is that obedience to the state is commanded, even when that obedience aids the state. Indeed, where the traditional Christian pacifist sees the government as strictly worldly, as a principality and power to be resisted, other Christians have seen government as a genuine good, "instituted by God" for the good of God's people. To be sure, the rulers are not peaceful. They are there to punish wrongdoers, who should be afraid, "for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!" (Romans 13:1–7).

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This is a very different view of government and violence from that of peaceful resistance. It is one in which it is important to distinguish the spheres of life, the purposes of God, and the callings of Christians. The life of faith is still envisioned as a life of peace, but this is fundamentally because life is lived in obedience to God, which includes a life of obedience to the state whose chief purpose is the upholding of law and order. As God's earthly authority, the state is no longer set against God's faithful people; government service is remade as a Christian calling. All Christians must distinguish between the religious life of mercy and the secular life of law and order.

The Politics of Justice

These two very different political orientations are joined by a third we can call a politics of justice. Like the politics of peace, this view stresses that the life of faith should be distinctively shaped in grateful response to the good news that God is reconciling the world in Christ. However, differently, this view claims God calls us to transform not only our lives but also our societies, including government. This marks a difference from the politics of obedience.

The politics of justice looks to Jesus' emphasis on the kingdom of God. Here is a larger story of God's work in the prophets and the law, culminating in Jesus and continuing in our day through the power of the Spirit. God is concerned not simply with individuals, but with relationships between individuals and communities. The call for justice is in the words of Jesus, such as the Good Samaritan or the Final Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46). But Jesus is not alone. In the prophetic tradition we also hear the Lord declaring judgment and justice:

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Thus says the LORD: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation (Jeremiah 22:1–5).

These words are about more than law and order. They call for reform of government so justice is served, so the powerful may no

longer abuse the vulnerable. Jeremiah challenges the king. This is the life of faith: a confident obedience to God, who is no respecter of persons or privilege. This story continued in the early church where Christians felt they “must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29).

Here then are three different political orientations, each with firm roots in the New Testament. Together they remind us that we Christians have always been a diverse bunch with differing views. Our lessons will not try to describe these three orientations equally but will set out more fully the politics of justice as the political orientation most often identified with Reformed Christians. This story starts with John Calvin’s sixteenth-century Geneva and continues into our own time. Along the way, the politics of peace and that of obedience will—in different ways—work to question our beliefs, challenge our perspective, and indicate where we might share a common witness to the glory of God.

Spiritual Practice

List the three political perspectives discussed here and then, thinking from each of these perspectives, list a few practical opportunities to engage in politics. Are there any that overlap? Prayerfully select one opportunity and then, after performing it, reflect on how it relates to your faith in God.

Questions for Reflection

When you think of religion and politics, what is the first thing that usually comes to mind?

Do you think it is possible to participate in politics in a Christian manner?

How has your thinking about politics changed over time and since reading this session?

Excerpt from A Brief Statement of Faith

For Gather:

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.

The same Spirit

who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

For Depart:

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From the *Book of Confessions* (10.4–10.5).