

## **Politics—To Engage or Not to Engage? Seeking a Biblical Perspective**

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Historically, the Mennonites, a Christian faith community descended from the Anabaptists of the Protestant reformation, have avoided any involvement in political issues. The increasingly global reach of the denomination, however, and its involvement in mission and service activities have brought about significant changes in the Mennonite understanding of the place of politics.<sup>1</sup> Administrators and constituents alike have come to recognize that “all service is woven into social and political structures” and that “our service cannot escape the realities of power in the world system.”<sup>2</sup> Formerly insulated, Mennonites have been “catapulted into the world” as their understanding of the divine mission has brought them into contact with the cataclysmic events of revolution, war, famine, deprivation, racism, injustice, violence, and repression. The net result has been a dramatic shift in the way Mennonites think and act in the political realm.



Tired of being viewed by religious voters in the United States as too secular or even hostile toward religion, the Democratic Party has launched a determined effort to win their votes. This focus was evident on the primary campaign trail, where many of the Democratic candidates spoke openly of God and of religion. Senator Hillary Clinton described how faith carried her through the turmoil of Bill Clinton’s infidelity.

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<sup>1</sup> R. J. R. Mathies, “Witness and Struggle or Politics and Power: MCC Engages the World,” *Direction* 23/2 (1994): 77.

<sup>2</sup> K. G. Miller, “Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington,” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1994), 93.

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Senator John Edwards spoke candidly of his “deep and abiding love for [his] Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> In a message to a multiracial evangelical congregation in Greenville, South Carolina, candidate Barack Obama stated that Democrats are not “fearful of talking about faith.”<sup>4</sup> Obama’s campaign, in fact, soon launched a grass-roots effort called “40 Days of Faith and Family,” intended to reach out to voters through a series of faith forums and gospel concerts. Senator Obama concluded his remarks in Greenville by saying, “We’re going to keep on praising together. I am confident that we can create a Kingdom right here on Earth.”



What do these vignettes have in common? Each, in essence, raises the issue of how a Christian should relate to politics—a matter increasingly relevant in a world of growing polarization and political agitation.

In this article, as we seek to address the relation of the Christian and politics in biblical perspective, we will consider the following questions:

What positions have been taken within the Christian community regarding the relationship to politics, and what rationale has been offered for each?

Which biblical principles can provide a reasoned framework for the relationship of the Christian and politics?

What orientation can be acquired from the lives of Bible characters and, particularly, that of Jesus Christ?

How might one then formulate an overarching Christian response to the relation of the believer and politics?

**A Gamut of Perspectives**

While there are probably as many nuanced perspectives on politics as there are faith communities, one might classify these positions in certain conceptual clusters. Building on the works of H. Richard Niebuhr<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C. Brinberg, “Democratic Voters Trying to Reach Religious Voters,” posted July 23, 2007, via <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/07/22/democrats.religion/index.html>.

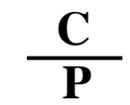
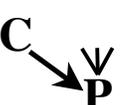
<sup>4</sup> P. Hamby, “Obama: GOP Doesn’t Own Faith Issue,” posted October 8, 2007, via <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/08/obama.faith/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). It may be noted that this essay departs from Niebuhr’s classification by inserting a “Christ dominates politics” position, in which the perceived will of God is imposed by human agents. The “Christ transforms culture” perspective will appear later under the stance of Lordship. The insertion of the “domination” position thus makes a total of six categories, rather than Niebuhr’s five, and is reflective of socio-political developments that have transpired since his seminal work was written.

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and Norman Thomas,<sup>6</sup> these categories could be defined as (1) rejection, (2) paradox, (3) critical collaboration, (4) synthesis, and (5) imposition (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Perspectives on the Relationship of Christianity and Politics**

STANCE	Rejection	Paradox	Critical Collaboration	Synthesis	Imposition
Focus	Christ against politics	Christ and politics	Christ above politics	Christ of politics	Christ dominates politics
Kingdom View	Exclusive one-kingdom	Separate kingdoms	Higher-lower kingdoms	Inclusive one-kingdom	Revolutionary kingdom
Orientation	Politics is seen as inherently evil, the domain of Satan	Politics is viewed as relatively evil, yet necessary	Politics is viewed as basically good or neutral, but deficient	Politics is uncritically viewed as good, at least in principle	Politics must be forcefully reshaped to conform to divine standards
Depiction					
Advocates	Tertullian, Fundamentalism	Jaques Ellul, Lutheranism	Thomas Aquinas, Catholicism	Justin Martyr, Liberalism	The Christian Right, Liberationism

**Rejection—Christ Against Politics.** Many fundamentalists view culture as inherently evil, the domain of Satan. In this exclusive one-kingdom approach, advocated by Tertullian, Christians are citizens only of the heavenly kingdom. The gospel is limited to the personal life, and the world is left to the devil. Politics is rejected, and the faith community seeks to separate and insulate itself from its corrupting influence.

Carl Knott,<sup>7</sup> for example, asserts that politics is a prohibited arena for the Christian, a web of worldly entanglement. There is an underlying assumption that government is fatally flawed and incapable of solving

<sup>6</sup> N. E. Thomas, “Church-State Relations and Mission,” in James M. Phillips and Robert T. Cootes (Eds.), *Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 363.

<sup>7</sup> C. Knott, “The Christian and Politics” (2001), via <http://www.nlbchapel.org/politics.htm>

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even the most basic problems of mankind. The greater concern, however, is that involvement in politics will result in “wasted hours, wasted funds, [and] wasted lives.” With politics seen as hopelessly inept and the end of all things at hand,<sup>8</sup> Knott questions:

Who would go into a condemned building and start painting the walls and replacing broken windows? Who would stay on a sinking ship washing dirty dishes in the galley? . . . The ship of this world is sinking like the Titanic, and our job is to get people in the lifeboat, to safety in Christ, not to paint the Titanic or elect a new captain or lookout because the old ones failed!

While acknowledging that Christian revivals in the time of Whitefield and Wesley are attributed with averting civil war in England, Knott also maintains that the impact came through preaching and prayer meetings, not by canvassing, campaigning, or getting out the vote.

Similarly, Robert Saucy argues that “believers are here to witness to the coming kingdom, not to inaugurate the kingdom rule.”<sup>9</sup> The rationale is that the Christian at present is but a pilgrim traveling to the heavenly Kingdom. As a “foreigner,” the believer should not engage in politics, apart from desiring freedom to serve God, and should have no concern about who runs the territory wherein he or she temporarily resides. A pamphlet produced by *The Testimony Magazine* contends: “Neither does the Christian participate in the processes of democracy to select a new government, nor in political protest against the existing arrangements. The Christian will abstain from supporting political groups by voting or by membership. A Christian’s vote has already been given to the Lord Jesus Christ as King.”<sup>10</sup>

Anderson<sup>11</sup> notes that many evangelical Christians—especially premillennial evangelicals—have developed a “psychology of eschatology,” withdrawing from social and political involvement because they feel that political systems are evil and a fulfillment of prophecy. Believing that the current social, economic, and political systems are headed for

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<sup>8</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 3:10-11.

<sup>9</sup> R. L. Saucy, “The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (January-March 1988): 46.

<sup>10</sup> “Basic Bible Principles: The Christian and Politics,” *Testimony Magazine* (undated), via <http://www.testimony-magazine.org/back/TheChristianandpolitics.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> K. Anderson, “A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action” (2002), via <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/xian-pol.html>

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destruction, they see politics as “worldly and ultimately a culmination of the Antichrist.”

Other Christian denominations, including the Amish,<sup>12</sup> historic Mennonites,<sup>13</sup> and Christadelphians,<sup>14</sup> have taken a similar stance. Christadelphians, for example, maintain that the Bible teaches that believers should avoid all involvement in politics. They hold that God, not man, is in control of humanity, and that God will work out His plan and purpose in due time. Consequently, non-involvement in politics is a deliberate statement of allegiance to God, of full submission to His will. How, they ask, are we to know which of our leaders is the one God wants to be in power? How shall we be sure, if we cast our vote, that we are voting for the person who is the right one in God’s eyes? Christadelphians consequently believe that God has His own perfect political agenda and that all the believer must do is rest in full confidence that God’s purpose will “be done on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>15</sup>

**Paradox—Christ and Politics.** For individuals such as Jacques Ellul,<sup>16</sup> the Christian lives in the world as best he can. Christianity and culture are in paradox, with no resolution in sight. In this separate kingdoms approach, politics is seen as evil, yet necessary. As a Christian, one should play no significant role in politics, participating in government only when required by law, endeavoring meanwhile to avoid its contaminating influence. The church, as an institution, withdraws into the sphere of the religious.

Such “passive identification”<sup>17</sup> espouses three fundamental premises: (1) that the Christian should “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”;<sup>18</sup> (2) that a Christian’s political involvement should not extend beyond those matters clearly required by law; and (3) that in matters of conscience, the believer’s stand may include civil disobedience, which may, in fact, be proposed and supported by church leaders.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Heffelbower, “The Christian and Civil Disobedience,” *Direction* 15/1 (1986): 23-30.

<sup>13</sup> Mathies, 77. Miller, 93.

<sup>14</sup> R. Carr, “The Christian and Politics” (2005), via [http://www.bibleed.com/bible\\_teachings/pamphlets/politics.htm](http://www.bibleed.com/bible_teachings/pamphlets/politics.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 6:9-10. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

<sup>16</sup> J. Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, 363.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 12:13-17.

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This stance of minimal involvement is predicated upon the concept that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, that we look for a city "whose architect and builder is God," and that we already have a full agenda with the gospel commission.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, we must repress the urge to "pull up the tares" that we find in the political field and instead allow the wheat and tares to grow together until the final judgment day, when God Himself will be the Judge.<sup>20</sup>

**Critical Collaboration—Christ Above Politics.** Thomas Aquinas maintained that while the Christian and culture must coexist, Christianity is superior to culture.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Yoder has emphasized "the absolute priority of church over state in the plan of God."<sup>22</sup> In this higher-lower kingdoms perspective, politics is viewed as basically good, or perhaps neutral, but still deficient. While accommodation and compromise may be inescapable in certain areas, the Christian's role is primarily that of (1) critique—evaluating political policies from the framework of the gospel, and of (2) judicious involvement in social issues—without compromising gospel priorities.

In the changing Mennonite view, for example, moral responsibility shifted away from a strict two-kingdom approach towards a perspective which called for action within the social arena. The ethical norm of non-resistance changed to a concern for justice, and the posture of separatism was traded for that of cooperation with the larger society. Mathies notes that the major theological forces forging these changes were ecumenical conversations and liberation theology.<sup>23</sup>

Other Christians have likewise focused on the "cultural mandate," seeking to improve living conditions and address moral corruption. Pratte, for example, maintains that while churches should not officially endorse candidates or finance political campaigns, Christians and their leaders should nevertheless speak out on social issues, such as abortion, gambling, pornography, homosexuality, contraceptives for unmarried teens, and an educational system that justifies these.<sup>24</sup> Pratte views this

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<sup>19</sup> Ref. John 18:36; Heb 11:10; and Luke 24:47,48.

<sup>20</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:24-30. K. Anderson, "Politics and Religion" (1991), via <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/pol-rel.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, 1951.

<sup>22</sup> J. H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, (Newton: Faith and Life, 1964), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Mathies, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> D. E. Pratte, "Should Christians Be Involved in Political Issues?" (2000), via <http://www.gospelway.com/christianlife/politics.php>.

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engagement as fulfilling one's God-given duty to preach truth and rebuke error.<sup>25</sup>

Peter Flamming, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, similarly draws the line between personal and institutional involvement, maintaining that while there ought to be a separation of church and State, there need not be a separation of citizen and State.<sup>26</sup> He warns, however, that pastors, as church leaders, should not themselves engage in politics. Further delimitations in this perspective include an over-emphasis on sociological issues to the abandoning of evangelistic priority<sup>27</sup> and aligning the cultural mandate with a particular political party or philosophy of government.<sup>28</sup>

**Synthesis—Christ of Politics.** In the tradition of Justin Martyr and reinvigorated by liberalism, government is viewed as inherently good, an element of the divine plan for humankind. In this inclusive one-kingdom view,<sup>29</sup> there is little or no tension between the Christian and politics. Christianity is, in fact, identified with politics at its best.

Hugo Zorrilla, for example, contends that the question is not whether the church is involved in politics, but rather what kind of political position should be taken. "Every Christian, every church, is involved in politics. . . . Every Christian activity—interpretation, preaching, prayer, singing—is carried out within a political framework. . . . Whether we like it or not, we are at the service of human beings in society for the glory of God."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Paul Marshall, from a Reformed perspective, asserts that "political authority is not an area apart from the gospel, but can be an area of ministry just as much as any office in the church. . . . The state is what God through Jesus Christ has set up to maintain justice. Its officers are as much ministers of God as are prophets and priests."<sup>31</sup> Politics is thus "a Christian calling, opportunity, and privilege."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ref. Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 5:11.

<sup>26</sup> P. J. Flamming, "The Christian and Politics" (2004), via <http://www.fbrichmond.org/ask/6-27-04ask.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> B. B. Beach, "The Christian and Politics," *Dialogue* 9/1 (1997): 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Ref. Luke 17:21; Acts 10:36.

<sup>30</sup> H. Zorrilla, "The Christian and Political Involvement," in Victor Adrian and Donald Loewen (Eds.), *Committed to World Mission: A Focus on International Strategy* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1990), 103-105.

<sup>31</sup> P. Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan Scott, 1984), 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> P. G. Elbrecht, *The Christian Encounters Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 9.

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Supporting this position is the rationale that civil government was instituted by God, and that throughout the Bible, godly leaders, such as David, Moses, Daniel, and Nehemiah, were engaged in the political world and proved to be valuable assets in God's plan. Based on this understanding, Craswell warns that the privatization of the Christian faith could result in the complete secularization of government and that this would be "an affront to a Holy God."<sup>33</sup> Christians are to be the salt and light of the world,<sup>34</sup> and consequently cannot opt out of the political process. This "active identification" perspective<sup>35</sup> has, in fact, yielded leading politicians who seek to be known as practicing Christians and even political parties that include a Christian descriptor in the party name.

Certain parameters, however, are proposed within this perspective, namely that the Christian's involvement in politics must be peaceful, lawful, and honorable; respectful of other people's opinions; and concerned for promoting righteousness.<sup>36</sup>

**Imposition—Christ Dominates Politics.** Some Christians, perhaps best exemplified by liberation theology and the Christian Right, maintain that Christianity must dramatically reshape culture. Through the political process, evil must be opposed and divine standards established as the law of the land. In this revolutionary kingdom perspective, the world is viewed as fallen, yet redeemable. Christians are God's agents for dramatic renovation, realigning government according to God's political agenda.

In this perspective, political involvement must go beyond merely speaking out on social issues. A Christian worldview implies a Christian world order. Christians, in fact, have a right and responsibility to help determine who runs the country and to install a Christian platform. Votes and political activism can make a difference. To sit back and do nothing but pray would, in this perspective, be failing God, duty, and country. "Our nation," Anderson notes, can be "turned around only through the dedicated, unswerving, relentless involvement of true Christians."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> E. Craswell, "The Biblical Basis for Christians in Politics and Government" (2007), via <http://www.whateveristrue.com/heritage/ticipate.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:13-16.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> K. Cauley, "The Christian and Politics" (2006), via [http://www.the-churchofchrist.com/government/the\\_christian\\_and\\_politics.htm](http://www.the-churchofchrist.com/government/the_christian_and_politics.htm).

<sup>37</sup> T. Anderson, "The Christian in Politics," *Straight Talk* 53/4 (January 28, 1988).

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Christianity’s main task, then, is to work toward creating a Christian political order that will result in establishing the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>38</sup> In essence, this is a move from quietism to militant activism, a mandate to bring the values and priorities of Christianity to government, to ensure that the “righteous are in authority.”<sup>39</sup>

**Biblical Principles.** As we have noted, differing perspectives on the relation of the Christian and politics appeal to particular biblical passages in formulating an underlying rationale. Indeed, it is vital to consider biblical principles when formulating a Christian position on any issue. This section will endeavor to present a representative response to the question: What principles does the Bible delineate regarding the Christian’s relationship to politics? (For a summary of these principles, see Figure 2.)

**Figure 2: Biblical Principles Regarding the Relation of Christianity and Politics**

Foundational Principles	God’s Role in Government	Relationship to Government	Action in Politics	Tension with Politics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The equality of man</li> <li>▪ Stewardship of the environment</li> <li>▪ A moral government results in prosperity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ God establishes civil government</li> <li>▪ God speaks out regarding corruption in government</li> <li>▪ God is ultimately in control of earthly government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ God expects citizens to respect and submit to civil authority</li> <li>▪ Christians, however, are not to blindly obey civil authority</li> <li>▪ God enjoins believers to pray for secular rulers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Christianity must permeate society</li> <li>▪ Christians have a responsibility to critique government</li> <li>▪ God encourages active involvement in social causes</li> <li>▪ Christians are to advocate peace</li> <li>▪ Christians must overcome evil with good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Political relationships involve inherent risks</li> <li>▪ Christians are Christians first</li> <li>▪ Heavenly citizenship carries both limitations and responsibilities</li> <li>▪ Christians must answer to a higher standard</li> </ul>

<sup>38</sup> R. J. Sider, *One-sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Proverbs 29:2.

**Foundational Principles.**

**The Equality of Man.** Any politics that takes the Bible as foundational must begin with the account of creation, where humankind is created in the image of God.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, all individuals, ethnic groups, and nations are created on a par, in the divine image. This becomes the basis of the legal and ethical system, in which all members of the community are considered equal in the eyes of the law. In the New Testament, we find this concept of the equality of man reiterated by Paul to the Athenians, when he observed that God “has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.”<sup>41</sup> This concept of divinely endowed human potential, as Beach notes, gives purpose, direction, and optimism to Christians serving within society.<sup>42</sup>

**Stewardship of the Environment.** The Genesis account assigns to humanity the task of caretaker of the creation. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”<sup>43</sup>—a stewardship mandate which has never been rescinded. Revelation 11:18, in fact, indicates that, at the end of earth’s history, God will “destroy them which destroy the earth” (KJV)—those who have been negligent in caring for the domain over which they had jurisdiction.

**A Moral Government Results in Prosperity.** Throughout Scripture, there is ample evidence that a government founded upon divine values results in national prosperity. “Righteousness exalts a nation.”<sup>44</sup> “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.”<sup>45</sup> Individuals with a Christian perspective and commitment can contribute to this well-being of society—“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice.”<sup>46</sup> The implication would seem to be that Christians can be placed in positions of government, and that this involvement is beneficent.

**God’s Role in Government**

**God Establishes Civil Government.** After the flood, God instructed Noah regarding civil penalties, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made

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<sup>40</sup> Ref. Gen 1:26-27.

<sup>41</sup> Acts 17:26, KJV.

<sup>42</sup> Beach, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Gen 2:15.

<sup>44</sup> Prov 14:34.

<sup>45</sup> Ps 33:12.

<sup>46</sup> Prov 29:2, KJV.

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man.”<sup>47</sup> In Exodus 21-23, God gave Moses a detailed plan for civil government—which addressed manslaughter, premeditated murder, assault, kidnapping, abortion, infanticide, property crimes, criminal negligence, and robbery. This divine plan also indicated that justice must be provided in court for the underprivileged and that checks must be established to ensure that the innocent are not condemned.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in Leviticus, chapters 13 and 20 address public health laws, while the first chapter of Deuteronomy describes a judicial system established jointly with cities of refuge, “so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial.”<sup>49</sup> In subsequent chapters (Deut 17-22), laws are delineated regarding violation of a court order, perjury, malicious accusations, building codes, juvenile delinquency, and rape.

Given this Old Testament backdrop, Paul declares, “There is no authority except that which God has established.”<sup>50</sup> One should note, however, that along with specifying the responsibilities of civil government, God also delineated qualifications for its leaders. These criteria stipulated that political leaders should be those who “fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness.”<sup>51</sup>

**God Speaks Out Regarding Corruption in Government.** God does not simply ignore political corruption; He directly confronts evil in government. “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees.”<sup>52</sup> “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, those who accept bribes, who distort justice, and who do not defend the cause of weak and marginalized members of society are reprovved.<sup>54</sup> In biblical times, God spoke out against corruption in government through the voice of His prophets. So today, Christians can serve as channels of the divine perspective and take their stand against injustice, corruption, and oppression.

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<sup>47</sup> Gen 9:6.

<sup>48</sup> Ref. Exodus 23:6-7.

<sup>49</sup> Numbers 35:12.

<sup>50</sup> Romans 13:1. While various translations indicate that these powers are “ordained” (KJV), “established” (NIV), or “instituted” (NRSV) by God, Yoder (*The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) argues quite persuasively that these renderings suggest God’s endorsement and are too strong a translation of the Greek word *tasso*. Instead, the powers are “ordered” by God—that is, “told where they belong.”

<sup>51</sup> Exod 18:21, KJV.

<sup>52</sup> Isa 10:1.

<sup>53</sup> Prov 17:15.

<sup>54</sup> Ref. Isa 1:23; Mic 3:9.

**God Is Ultimately in Control of Earthly Government.** “Dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.”<sup>55</sup> If God is indeed “Lord of heaven and earth” and has given all authority to His Son,<sup>56</sup> then it stands to reason Jesus Christ is Lord of the political realm. Both politicians and political processes should therefore be willing to recognize His Lordship. Moreover, God, in the biblical view, is actively engaged in placing and removing rulers.<sup>57</sup> “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”<sup>58</sup>

Government, however, is influenced, but not predestined, by God. “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, God at times permits events to take place that are not according to His will, abiding the time when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”<sup>60</sup>

#### **The Believer’s Relationship to Government.**

##### **God Expects Citizens to Respect and Submit to Civil Authority.**

Believers are not to revile rulers, despise authority, nor show contempt for a judge.<sup>61</sup> Ezra 7:26, for example, warns that “whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.” Christians consequently are to respect the state and to submit to civil authority. Peter writes, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to the governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ps 22:29; see also Acts 17:26-27.

<sup>56</sup> Matt 11:25; Acts 17:24; John 3:35; 13:3.

<sup>57</sup> Ref. 1 Kings 14:14; Ps 75:6-7; Dan 2:21; 4:17.

<sup>58</sup> Prov 21:1, KJV; see also Prov 29:26.

<sup>59</sup> Jer 18:7-10; see also Amos 9:8.

<sup>60</sup> Rev 11:15.

<sup>61</sup> Ref. Exod 22:28; Deut 17:12; Eccl 10:20; Titus 3:1; 2 Pet 2:10-12; Jude 8-10.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Pet 2:13-15; see also Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:17.

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Compliance with civil laws and regulations, even those of a secular government, is the Christian's God-given duty. Despite the shameful treatment he had often received at the hands of the Roman government,<sup>63</sup> Paul wrote: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities. . . . It is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes<sup>64</sup>; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."<sup>65</sup> Neufeld notes that Paul's counsel may have been rather difficult for a Jewish Christian in Rome to accept, particularly at a time when the empire was brutally oppressing and dominating the land of Palestine,

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<sup>63</sup> Ref. Acts 16:22-24, 37, 38.

<sup>64</sup> The particular occasion that generated Paul's counsel may be rooted in an attempt by certain Christians to join with their Jewish friends in an anti-Roman tax revolt at the beginning of Nero's reign, as recorded by the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus [M. Borg, "A New Context for Romans XIII," *New Testament Studies* 19 (1973): 205-18. J. Isaak, "The Christian Community and Political Responsibility: Romans 13:1-7," *Direction* 32/1 (2003): 32-46. J. I. H. McDonald, "Romans 13:1-7: A Test Case for New Testament Interpretation," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 544.]. Additionally, Paul may be advising Jewish Christians, recently returned to Rome after having been exiled by the Emperor Claudius, against becoming involved in any Palestinian-Jewish nationalistic movement [A. R. Culpepper, "God's Righteousness in the Life of His People: Romans 12-15," *Review and Expositor* 73/4 (1974): 451.] Paul probably recognized that unity among the Christian believers would be impossible in mixed Jew-Gentile communities, were the Jews to be voicing anti-Roman ideas.

<sup>65</sup> Rom 13:1-7. Initially this passage was received as an exhortation urging Christian communities not to resist the state's efforts to govern [L. T. Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997). J. E. Toews, "Peacemakers from the Start: The Jesus Way in the Early Church," in *The Power of the Lamb*, ed. J. E. Toews and G. Nickel (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1986), 45-55. W. Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).]. By the fifth century, however, it was interpreted quite differently by Augustine [*The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, orig. ed. 462), book XIX, chapter 17.] to make two claims: (a) that the state is justified in its use of force, and (b) that church and state are to work together in the execution of justice. These claims were then used to promote the notion of a Christian state, to demand unquestioning allegiance, and to justify the extermination of those deemed as threats. This theology of state was subsequently incorporated in the Protestant understanding of Rom 13 (M. Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by J. T. Mueller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954, orig. ed. 1515-1516), 163-65. J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans*, trans. R. Mackenzie, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, orig. ed. 1540), 280-281.] and continues to inform contemporary thinking.

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the Promised Land.<sup>66</sup> To heed Paul's advice would mean placing obedience to instituted authorities ahead of love for race and homeland.

**Christians Are Not to Blindly Obey Civil Authority.** God orders the powers,<sup>67</sup> but this does not mean that rulers will always do God's will. Consequently, it is not by accident that the imperative is not literally one of obedience, but rather of subordination.<sup>68</sup> A conscientious objector, for example, who refuses to bear arms despite the command of his government, still remains under the sovereignty of that government and accepts the penalties which it imposes. He is subordinate, even though he is not obeying.

Similarly, Peter's instruction to submit to authority<sup>69</sup> does not mean that the believer must mindlessly obey government demands that are contrary to the Christian faith. Peter himself clarified that in such situations one must "obey God rather than men."<sup>70</sup> It is perhaps significant that when Paul asks, "Do you wish to have no fear of authority?"<sup>71</sup> he does not say, "Then do what the authority says," but rather, "Do what is good." The implication seems to be that there is a reflective intermediate step of discerning whether the demand of government is good or not, in light of divine requirements.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, we should note that Jesus warned that true believers would be arrested and brought to trial before governors and kings.<sup>73</sup> Implicit in this passage is that Christ did not expect His followers to obey every authority, but to bear witness to those authorities. Thus, for the Christian, the state is not the highest authority.

**God Enjoins Believers to Pray for Secular Rulers.** God's chosen people are urged to "pray for the well-being of the king and his sons" and for the peace of nations.<sup>74</sup> When the Jews were captive in Babylon, for example, the prophet Jeremiah sent a directive indicating that they were

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<sup>66</sup> M. G. Neufeld, "Submission to Governing Authorities: A Study of Romans 13:1-7," *Direction* 23/2 (1994): 90-97.

<sup>67</sup> Ref. Rom 13:1.

<sup>68</sup> This concept is further developed in J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> Ref. 1 Pet 2:9-17.

<sup>70</sup> Acts 4:19; 5:29.

<sup>71</sup> Rom 13:3.

<sup>72</sup> W. Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> Ref. Mark 13:9-11.

<sup>74</sup> Ezra 6:10; also Ps 122:6.

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to pray for the empire's peace and prosperity.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, in the New Testament, Paul urged "that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."<sup>76</sup> As Christians, we must not underestimate the power of prayer in politics.

**Action in the Relation to Politics.**

**Christianity Must Permeate Society.** In His inaugural address, Christ indicated that believers should be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."<sup>77</sup> Salt does not properly flavor, however, unless it permeates its subject matter; light is not effective if cloistered. Given that government is a dimension of the larger society, it would seem to follow that Christians have a strategic responsibility to be socially and politically involved.

**Christians Have a Moral Responsibility to Critique Government.**

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.<sup>78</sup>

The concept of "watchman" does not appear to be limited to individuals, but to society, as well. Psalm 12:8-9 notes, for instance, that neglecting to address societal wrongs can result in the proliferation of evil. Furthermore, Paul writes that we, as Christians, are to "have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."<sup>79</sup>

**God Encourages Active Involvement in Social Causes.** Christians are admonished to "do justice and love mercy."<sup>80</sup> They are encouraged to become actively involved in the issues facing society. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy

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<sup>75</sup> Ref. Jer 29:4-7.

<sup>76</sup> 1 Tim 2:1-2.

<sup>77</sup> Ref. Matt 5:13-16.

<sup>78</sup> Ezek 3:17-19.

<sup>79</sup> Eph 5:11.

<sup>80</sup> Mic 6:8.

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burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?”<sup>81</sup>

In a dramatic parable,<sup>82</sup> Jesus outlined the standards by which individuals and entire communities would be judged:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

Clearly, those who inherit God’s kingdom are actively involved in bettering the lives of those around them. These concrete acts of compassion for the less fortunate members of society are linked to attaining a personal relationship with God—“As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Similarly, James notes that the “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”<sup>83</sup> In essence, as Paul observes, “the entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>84</sup>

**Christians Are to Be Advocates of Peace.** Implementing God’s plan for humanity, nations “will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”<sup>85</sup> The passage suggests that Christians are to be advocates of non-violence. Paul reiterated this concept on various occasions: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”<sup>86</sup> As “Prince of Peace,” Jesus Christ instructed His followers: “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.”<sup>87</sup>

**Christians Must Overcome Evil with Good.** In Rom 12:14-21, Paul calls believers to a life characterized by nonstandard behavior—“bless those who persecute you,” “associate with the lowly,” and “do not

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<sup>81</sup> Isa 58:6, KJV.

<sup>82</sup> Ref. Matt 25:31-46.

<sup>83</sup> James 1:27; see also Titus 3:1.

<sup>84</sup> Gal 5:14.

<sup>85</sup> Isa 2:4.

<sup>86</sup> Rom 12:18; 14:19; see also Titus 3:1.

<sup>87</sup> Luke 6:29; ref. Isa 9:6.

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repay anyone evil for evil.” He then continues with reminders to “live peaceably with all” and to “never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath [of God]”—a divine vengeance which involves the “public righting of wrong.”<sup>88</sup>

Paul then provides a directive to “heap burning coals on their heads.”<sup>89</sup> At first glance, this might seem manipulative, a form of psychological revenge to get the enemy to say “I’m sorry.” In reality, it may be a reference to an ancient Egyptian reconciliation ritual.<sup>90</sup> In early civilizations, fire was a valuable commodity for cooking and heating. Consequently, it was a life-giving act to heap coals into a person’s pot so that he might carry them on his head back to his campsite. In this way, the Christian community is not passive, but “overcomes evil with good.”<sup>91</sup>

**Tension in the Relation to Politics.**

**Political Relationships Involve Inherent Risks.** Throughout Scripture, the believer is repeatedly warned of worldly entanglements. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”<sup>92</sup> “No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him.”<sup>93</sup> Passages such as these suggest that political relationships may involve potential risks.

**Christians Are Christians First.** Christians cannot live dualistic lives—“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, Christ’s believers are both “in the world” while not “of the world.”<sup>95</sup> This tension can be resolved by seeking “first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> J. Isaak, “The Christian Community and Political Responsibility: Romans 13:1-7,” *Direction* 32/1 (2003): 32-46.

<sup>89</sup> Rom 12:20; ref. Prov 25:21-22.

<sup>90</sup> W. Klassen, “Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge? (Rom. 12:20; Prov. 25:22),” *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963): 337-50. See also Isaak, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Rom 12:21.

<sup>92</sup> 2 Cor 6:14.

<sup>93</sup> 2 Tim 2:4, RSV. Similarly, “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” (2 Cor 6:17). “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15).

<sup>94</sup> Matt 6:24, KJV.

<sup>95</sup> John 17:15-16.

<sup>96</sup> Matt 6:33, KJV.

and then all other aspects of life, including one's relationship to politics, acquire their proper place.

**Heavenly Citizenship Carries Both Limitations and Responsibilities.** Describing the "enemies of the cross of Christ," Paul notes that "their mind is on earthly things." By contrast, he states, "our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>97</sup> The implication is that the Christian's primary focus cannot be on "earthly things"—on politics from a purely secular perspective, for example.

Paul reiterates this concept in Colossians 3:1-2: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, . . . set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." In a similar vein, Peter adds, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," although "aliens and exiles" here on earth.<sup>98</sup>

While there are clearly limitations for heavenly citizens, there are also responsibilities. Paul notes, for example, that "we are ambassadors for Christ."<sup>99</sup> As an ambassador, each Christian is an official representative of another kingdom, seeking to establish positive relationships and favorably influence decisions in the nation to which he or she has been assigned.

**Christians Must Answer to a Higher Standard.** Paul observes that as Christians we are to align ourselves with that which is honorable "in the sight of God," and not merely what is legal "in the sight of men."<sup>100</sup> Certain political strategies, for example, may be inappropriate for the Christian—"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power."<sup>101</sup>

In sum, it seems evident that the Scriptures provide guiding principles for each facet of life, including politics. These include an understanding of God's role in government, the believer's relationship to government, and the Christian's relation to politics—both in terms of tension and action.

It is necessary, however, to consider context in applying biblical principles. Historical and political circumstances can create important

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<sup>97</sup> Phil 3:18-21.

<sup>98</sup> 1 Pet 2:9-11.

<sup>99</sup> 2 Cor 5:20.

<sup>100</sup> 2 Cor 8:21, KJV.

<sup>101</sup> 2 Cor 10:3-4.

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differences in the relevance and applicability of a given principle. The Old Testament state of theocracy, for example, is quite distinct from the New Testament situation of a marginalized and often despised Christian community. Furthermore, the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth provides an expanded ethical framework and clarifies the Christian stance regarding politics. Consequently, it can be particularly enlightening to examine how individuals throughout Scripture, under a variety of circumstances, applied the divine principles in their relationship to politics.

**Insights from Biblical Characters**

While biblical principles provide relevant guidelines for the Christian's relation with politics, orientation can also be gained from the lives of Bible characters. We find, in fact, the principles repeatedly illustrated throughout Scripture in the actions and priorities of individuals. In this section, we will examine a variety of cases from Old and New Testaments, and particularly, the example of Christ.

**The Case of Joseph.** Brought before the Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, Joseph makes clear reference to Jehovah as the One who is in control of history.<sup>102</sup> Joseph, however, does not rest with mere interpretation. He also proposes a plan of political action, including political appointments and taxation.<sup>103</sup> Recognizing the value of a spiritual perspective within government, the king of Egypt asks, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

Some years later, in the midst of the famine, Joseph tells his brothers that it was God who "has made me lord of all Egypt" and that this occurred in order "to save lives."<sup>104</sup> Joseph, in essence, considered his position in government to be a direct result of God's intervention, in order that he might assist others through times of hardship.

**The Case of Moses.** As a political activist, Moses may be without peer in Scripture. Spotting the abuse of a Hebrew by an Egyptian taskmaster, for example, he took immediate action and killed the Egyptian.<sup>105</sup> This act aborted his early political career and led to forty years of exile.

By God's direct invitation, however, Moses initiated a second attempt to help his oppressed people, confronting Pharaoh and freeing the

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<sup>102</sup> Ref. Gen 41:25,28,32.

<sup>103</sup> Ref. Gen 41:33-38.

<sup>104</sup> Gen 45:5-9; see also Gen 50:20.

<sup>105</sup> Ref. Exod 2:11-15.

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Hebrew nation from slavery.<sup>106</sup> He then instituted a well-developed system of government for the Hebrew nation. As recorded in Heb 11:24-27, his work as an advocate of a down-trodden, marginalized people places Moses in the select group of heroes of faith.

During the years in which Israel journeyed through the wilderness, an insurrection arose, spearheaded by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. These individuals criticized the leadership of Moses and Aaron and defied their authority. Moses replied, “If the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.”<sup>107</sup> In essence, this rebellion against an established government was viewed as an insurgence against God Himself and was quelled by God’s direct intervention.

**The Case of Saul.** Although not in His preferred plan of a direct theocracy, God nevertheless instructed the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as a political “leader over my people Israel.”<sup>108</sup> Some years later, however, when Saul had rejected God, Samuel informed him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you.”<sup>109</sup> In both instances it is evident that God becomes directly involved in setting up and deposing civil rulers.

In the story of Saul, we also find an intriguing incident regarding civil protest. One day, in a fit of rage, King Saul vowed to kill his son, Jonathan. The king’s soldiers, however, protested, “Should Jonathan die—he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the LORD lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God’s help.”<sup>110</sup> Their political intervention was effective and Jonathan was spared, illustrating that political activism can alter a course of affairs and result in favorable outcomes for citizens.

**The Case of David.** Samuel had secretly anointed David as the next king of Israel. King Saul, well aware of David’s popularity, pursued him tenaciously, determined to kill him. By a strange turn of events, however,

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<sup>106</sup> Ref. Exod 2:23-14:31.

<sup>107</sup> Num 16:30.

<sup>108</sup> 1 Sam 9:15-17.

<sup>109</sup> 1 Sam 15:28; see also Acts 13:22.

<sup>110</sup> 1 Sam 14:44-45.

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Saul was found in David's power and his men urged him to kill Saul. David replied, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord."<sup>111</sup> On yet another occasion, Abishai requested David's permission to slay Saul. Again, David refused, "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives, the Lord himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed."<sup>112</sup> In both situations, David seemed content to leave in God's hands the removal of corrupt leadership, at least in terms of a situation in which it would serve his own political career.

Years later, one of David's sons, Absalom, began engineering for the throne.

He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom . . . would say to him, 'Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you. . . . If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice.' Also, whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him and kiss him. . . . So he stole the hearts of the men of Israel.<sup>113</sup>

The result of this political ambition and underhanded campaigning was an ill-fated rebellion.

Fleeing the rebellion, David left Jerusalem. Zadok and Abiathar brought out the ark of God, determined to loyally follow the king. When David realized what was happening, he said, "Aren't you priests? Go back to the city in peace."<sup>114</sup> From his reaction, David apparently assumed that religious leaders should not engage in partisan politics.

At a later date, Adonijah proclaimed himself king without David's knowledge. Nathan the prophet, aware of David's promise to Bathsheba that her son, Solomon, would be the next king, notified Bathsheba of the

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<sup>111</sup> 1 Sam 24:6.

<sup>112</sup> 1 Sam 26:7-11.

<sup>113</sup> 2 Sam 15:2-6.

<sup>114</sup> 1 Sam 15:27.

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development and urged her to petition David. Furthermore, Nathan offered to come before the king and intercede in her favor.<sup>115</sup> In this case, we find Nathan, a religious leader, endeavoring to guide the political process within ethical and moral parameters.

**The Case of Ahab.** As recorded in 1 Kings 21:5-13, Ahab and Jezebel conspired to take possession of Naboth's vineyard. They sent a secret communication to local officials,

Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.

As might be expected, Elijah, a religious leader, reproved Ahab for this base crime.

The most tragic part of the story, however, is that "the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them." If they had taken a position of integrity, in opposition to the immoral political directive, the tragic course of the nation might have been altered. It seems evident that both citizens and community leaders have a moral responsibility to resist the devastating impact of a corrupt government on innocent lives.

**The Case of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar.** Finding himself unexpectedly in alien territory, Daniel soon distinguished himself as an individual of ability, conviction, and integrity.<sup>116</sup> Shortly thereafter, furious with his wise men's inability to resolve a dream, Nebuchadnezzar ordered his guards to round up the magi for execution. Daniel requested Arioch, commander of the guard, for a brief stay in order to enable him to interpret the dream. Meeting Arioch the next morning, Daniel's first concern was for the well-being of the magi, who served as political advisors to the king.

Delighted that his dream had been interpreted, Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon, a political position that Daniel accepted. Furthermore, at Daniel's request, the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as provincial administrators. Daniel, a prophet of God, did not view as inappropriate that believers should occupy positions of civil responsibility in a pagan government.

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<sup>115</sup> Ref. 1 Kings 1:11-30.

<sup>116</sup> Ref. Dan 1:8-20.

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Daniel 3 records that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were present at the dedication of the golden image, as Nebuchadnezzar had directed, but refused to bow down to the image. In essence, they submitted to civil authority—presenting themselves and not resisting punishment, but refused to compromise moral principle by worshiping a false god. God approved of their stance by joining them in the fiery furnace.

As is tempting for powerful political figures, Nebuchadnezzar came to believe that the success of his empire was the result of his own acumen, and this resulted in a period of personal insanity. Three times in Daniel 4, which records Nebuchadnezzar's reflection on the experience, the principle is repeated that "the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will".<sup>117</sup> It seems clear that God is ultimately in control, even of secular government.

Under the Medo-Persian empire, Daniel was again appointed to a high government position. Due to political intrigue, a law was passed that no one should worship any god but the king for thirty days. "Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before."<sup>118</sup> When confronted with an edict contrary to his commitment to God, Daniel did not hesitate to engage in civil disobedience, but at the same time, he did not resist the consequences of his convictions.

**The Case of Nehemiah.** Nehemiah held a position of responsibility in the court of Artaxerxes. Although a contingent of Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild, news reached Nehemiah that little progress had been made. His face mirroring his despondency, Nehemiah was asked by the king what the problem might be. When Nehemiah explained, Artaxerxes asked, "What is it you want?" Nehemiah writes, "Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.'"<sup>119</sup>

When the king agreed, Nehemiah courageously presented a further request: "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest,

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<sup>117</sup> Verses 17, 25, and 32.

<sup>118</sup> Dan 6:10.

<sup>119</sup> Neh 2:4-5; subsequently, verses 7-8.

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so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” Artaxerxes not only granted this second request, but provided an escort of army officers and cavalry. With divine blessing, Nehemiah used his position in the court of a civil ruler to extend the work of God.

**The Case of Esther and Mordecai.** Although God is never directly referred to, the book of Esther presents a vivid portrayal of the great controversy between good and evil, played out in the domain of politics. The story begins with Esther, a young Jewish girl, selected from obscurity to be the queen of Xerxes, and her cousin, Mordecai, a civil servant, refusing to pay homage to Haman, a high official in the court.

Enraged, Haman determined revenge, intending not only to annihilate Mordecai, but to exterminate his entire race. When news of the intended genocide reached Mordecai, he asked for Esther’s assistance. When Esther demurred, Mordecai responded, “If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”<sup>120</sup> Esther replied, “Gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

Cleverly, Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet, but left the king in suspense as to her motive. Unable to sleep that night, Xerxes requested that the royal records be read. Providentially, a portion was selected which recorded “that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.”<sup>121</sup> As Mordecai had not been rewarded for this act of loyalty, the following morning Xerxes instructed Haman to publicly honor Mordecai. That evening, at the king’s urging, Esther presented her request, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation.”<sup>122</sup> She then identified Haman as the perpetrator of the sinister plot.

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<sup>120</sup> Esth 4:14; subsequently, verse 16.

<sup>121</sup> Esth 6:2.

<sup>122</sup> Esth 7:3-4.

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After Haman's death, Xerxes instructed Mordecai to write a new decree to neutralize the original law. Mordecai wrote an edict granting the Jews "the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies."<sup>123</sup> An ethnic cleansing was thus averted.

In this extended narrative, we encounter (1) civil disobedience—Mordecai refusing to bow to Haman and Esther entering the king's presence uninvited, (2) a plan to lobby civil authority and avert genocide—inviting the king and Haman to a series of banquets, (3) a report to authorities of criminal activity—Mordecai revealing the assassination plot, (4) the enacting of new legislation to counteract the effects of a damaging law, and (5) the granting a threatened people group the right to defend themselves.

**The Case of Deborah, the Prophetess.** After the death of Joshua, the Israelites were oppressed by Jabin, king of Canaan. Deborah, a prophetess, summoned Barak, instructed him to lead a revolt against Jabin, and personally joined the military campaign. Some Israelites, however, declined to become involved. "'Curse Meroz,' said the angel of the Lord. 'Curse its people bitterly, because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord against the mighty.'"<sup>124</sup> Based on this incident, it seems apparent that there are situations where passivity is an inappropriate response.

**The Case of Baasha.** As noted in the experiences of Saul and Nebuchanezzar, the case of Baasha confirms that God installs and removes civil rulers. In this instance, however, it is clarified that this intervention is not an arbitrary act, but rather a response to that ruler's leadership. "Then the word of the Lord came to Jehu son of Hanani against Baasha: 'I lifted you up from the dust and made you leader of my people Israel, but you walked in the ways of Jeroboam and caused my people Israel to sin and to provoke me to anger by their sins. So I am about to consume Baasha and his house.'"<sup>125</sup>

**The Case of Jehoshaphat.** In his government, Jehoshaphat appointed judges in each of the major cities of Judah. He reminded these men that they were to judge according to the divine standard—justly and

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<sup>123</sup> Esth 8:11.

<sup>124</sup> Judg 5:23.

<sup>125</sup> 1 Kgs 16:1-3.

without partiality or corruption.<sup>126</sup> The implication is that politicians should be held to ethical norms of leadership and conduct.

**The Case of Elisha.** Appreciative of the kindness shown to him by the woman of Shunam, the prophet Elisha offered to do something for her—perhaps to speak on her behalf to the king or commander of the army.<sup>127</sup> As illustrated in this incident, it seems appropriate, even for religious leaders, to intercede before government on behalf of those who may find themselves without voice.

**The Case of Jeremiah.** In commissioning the prophet Jeremiah, God gave him a political function: “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”<sup>128</sup> Again we see God actively involved in the realm of human government; this time, however, by means of a specially appointed messenger.

**The Case of Cyrus.** In Isaiah 45:1-4, God refers to Cyrus as His “anointed”, even though Cyrus was not aware of God’s direct involvement in his life. Furthermore, Cyrus’ political role was prophesied some 170 years before he was born, indicating God’s foreknowledge of political personages and events. We might note that God’s involvement was “for the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen”—in order to assure the survival and well-being of His people.

**The Case of John the Baptist.** We now turn to a number of cases in the New Testament, beginning with John the Baptist. “Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for John had been saying to him: ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’”<sup>129</sup> Luke 3:19-20 adds that in addition to the adulterous relationship with Herodias, John had rebuked Herod for “all the other evil things he had done.”

From John’s experience, it seems apparent that there is an obligation to speak out against corruption and immorality. In essence, respect of authority does not include a glossing over of sin. Christians cannot simply excuse what rulers do simply because of who they are.

**The Case of James and John.** In order to gain influence and perhaps occupy key positions in the anticipated kingdom, James and John enlisted the aid of their mother to petition Jesus that they might sit “at

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<sup>126</sup> Ref. 2 Chron 19:5-10.

<sup>127</sup> Ref. 2 Kgs 4:11-13.

<sup>128</sup> Jer 1:9-10.

<sup>129</sup> Matt 14:3-4.

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your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”<sup>130</sup> Jesus, however, declined to offer the brothers these prized positions, stating that “these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

When the other disciples heard of what had transpired, they were indignant. Jesus then called the disciples together and said,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The principle emerges that seeking political office for the sake of position and prestige is contrary to the spirit of Jesus.

**The Case of Pilate.** There is an inherent danger in politics of valuing position over principle. This is evident in the case of Pilate. He knew that Jesus was innocent; even his wife, warned in a dream, cautioned him not to have “anything to do with that innocent man.”<sup>131</sup> Afraid, however, of the possible consequences to his political career, Pilate “washed his hands” of the matter and condemned Jesus to death.

**The Case of Peter and the Apostles.** Brought before the Sanhedrin, a religious-civil government, the apostles were given strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus. Peter replied, “We must obey God rather than men!”<sup>132</sup> When members of the council urged that the apostles be put to death, Gamaliel intervened on their behalf, persuading the council and securing their release. Although flogged, the disciples were not intimidated by the threats of the Sanhedrin. “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” This episode clarifies (1) that the Christian must maintain loyalty to a Higher Authority than civil government, (2) that civil disobedience can be an appropriate response, and (3) that when in a position of civil authority, as was Gamaliel, one is able to exert an influence on the side of good.

**The Case of Paul.** Prior to his conversion, Saul of Tarsus was deeply involved in politics. As a Pharisee and roving representative of the Sanhedrin, he was an energetic member of one of the most active

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<sup>130</sup> Matt 20:21-23; subsequently, verses 25-28.

<sup>131</sup> Matt 27:19-24; see also John 19:12-13.

<sup>132</sup> Acts 5:27; subsequently verses 34-42.

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political parties in Jewish society. He also saw good opportunity to advance his career by persecuting the followers of Jesus.<sup>133</sup> On the road to Damascus, however, he encountered Christ and the direction of his life changed. As this early incident in Paul's experience illustrates, it is possible that involvement in politics may run contrary to God's plan for a Christian's life.

Throughout his ministry, Paul used his rights as a Roman citizen on various occasions to further the gospel and to work for his own protection.<sup>134</sup> In Philippi, for example, Paul and Silas were publicly beaten and thrown into prison. During the night, freed by the jolt of an earthquake, they did not try to escape, but used the opportunity to witness to the jailer. In the morning, the magistrates sent their officers to release Paul and Silas. Paul, however, stated, "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."<sup>135</sup> In essence, Paul requested a public admission that the government position was wrong and that the fledgling Christian community in Philippi posed no threat to Roman law.

On a subsequent occasion, a Roman commander decided that Paul should be examined by flogging.

As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" . . . Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.<sup>136</sup>

A few days later, appraised of a sinister plot against his life, Paul notified the Roman authorities of the conspiracy and accepted the protection of two centurions and 470 soldiers to deliver him into the custody of Felix, the governor.<sup>137</sup> Once in Caesarea, however, Paul declined to bribe Felix for his release. Finally, appearing before Festus, Paul maintained

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<sup>133</sup> Ref. Acts 22:3-14.

<sup>134</sup> Incidents may be found in Acts 16:35-40; 22:24-29; 23:12-33; 25:10-12.

<sup>135</sup> Acts 16:37. The Lex Valeria (509 B.C.), Lex Porcia (248 B.C.), and Lex Julia (23 B.C.) shielded Roman citizens from humiliating public punishment, such as beating with rods. Furthermore, a Roman citizen was always entitled to a trial before punishment was administered.

<sup>136</sup> Acts 22:25-29.

<sup>137</sup> Ref. Acts 23-25.

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his innocence and used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal for a hearing before Caesar. We might note, however, that Paul's appeal for trial in Rome was not primarily to save his life, but in order to enable him to carry the gospel directly to the imperial court.<sup>138</sup>

These experiences in Paul's life illustrate several key concepts: (1) When knowledgeable of its laws, the believer may appeal to the state for justice and for protection of the well-being of its citizens. (2) Christians may use their legal rights as citizens to maintain freedom and to further the gospel. (3) A Christian must be submissive to civil authority (e.g., remaining in the Philippian jail when he had ample opportunity to escape), but refrain from participation in its corruption (e.g., refusing to bribe Felix for release).

**The Example of Christ.** In each facet of our lives, we are to follow the example and teaching of Jesus. Consequently, it is particularly important for us to ask: How did Jesus respond when faced with the political issues of His day? What did He expect of His disciples, and, by extension, of His followers today? It is in considering the life and ministry of Jesus that we may best clarify the relationship of the Christian and politics.

Christ was to exercise the power of government. Centuries prior to Christ's birth, Isaiah wrote:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called . . . Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.<sup>139</sup>

Shortly after His birth, Jesus was, in fact, targeted by Herod as a potential political rival, who tried unsuccessfully to destroy Him.<sup>140</sup>

After His baptism, Christ was tempted by the devil. The final temptation involved a political dimension: "The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'"<sup>141</sup> Jesus successfully resisted the allure of worldly power with

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<sup>138</sup> See Acts 23:11; 2 Tim 4:6.

<sup>139</sup> Isa 9:6-7.

<sup>140</sup> Ref. Matt 2:7-18.

<sup>141</sup> Mat 4:8-10

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the response, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

When Jesus announced in Nazareth the beginning of His ministry, He outlined far-reaching political principles, suggesting that fundamental changes would be needed in the basic structures of society: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.”<sup>142</sup> Christ’s daily life was, in fact, a grassroots effort—associating with castaways, eating with the rejected of society, bringing hope to the marginalized and exploited.<sup>143</sup> He spoke out against societal wrongs—not caring for aged parents and “devouring widows’ houses.”<sup>144</sup> He declined, however, to become installed as a civil authority, stating, in response to a dispute over inheritance, “Who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”<sup>145</sup>

Christ clearly dealt, nonetheless, with sociopolitical issues—so much so that people wanted to crown Him king.<sup>146</sup> How did Jesus, a leader with personal charisma and gifts of oratory, respond to this groundswell? Did He seize it as an opportunity to enunciate a political platform, to clean up an immoral and corrupt government, or to free his nation from the yoke of Rome? If He had decided to set up His kingdom on earth, there is ample evidence that He would have been successful.<sup>147</sup> It appears, however, that Christ was not interested in holding political office or in revolutionizing the political order. Rather, he made it clear that His kingdom was “not of this world.”<sup>148</sup> His goal was to change society one heart at a time.

Christ’s teachings are also instructive. He promoted, for example, the principle of non-violence. “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.”<sup>149</sup> He focused on service, rather than on position. When a contention erupted among His disciples as to which of them was the greatest, Jesus advised, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them;

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<sup>142</sup> Luke 4:18.

<sup>143</sup> Recorded, for example, in Matt 9:10-11; Luke 7:34; Luke 19:1-8; John 4:1-42.

<sup>144</sup> Mat 15:5; Luke 20:47.

<sup>145</sup> Luke 12:13-14.

<sup>146</sup> Ref. John 6:15.

<sup>147</sup> See, for example, Luke 19:38; John 12:13-15.

<sup>148</sup> John 18:36.

<sup>149</sup> Luke 6:29.

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and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. . . . I am among you as one who serves.”<sup>150</sup>

Christ also advocated the concept of submission to civil authority within the framework of allegiance to God. When the unlikely alliance of the Pharisees and the Herodians tried to entrap Him with a question of taxation, Jesus replied, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”<sup>151</sup>

In particular, the final hours of Christ’s life speak persuasively regarding the Christian’s relation to government and politics. In Gethsemane, Christ prayed that his followers, although in the world, might not become “of the world.”<sup>152</sup> When confronted by a mob, sent by the civil-religious authorities to arrest Him, He did not attempt to resist or escape, although He did request that His disciples might not be apprehended. In an act of loyalty and perhaps desperation, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant. Jesus responded, “Put your sword back in its place. . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”<sup>153</sup>

Although Jesus would not defend himself against the false accusations, when the Roman governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say.”<sup>154</sup> He went on to clarify, however, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest.”<sup>155</sup> Later, when Pilate asked, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”<sup>156</sup>

Although Jesus was accused of being politically subversive, Pilate declared him to be innocent of political resistance to Roman power, stating, “I find no basis for a charge against this man.”<sup>157</sup> Falsely condemned

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<sup>150</sup> Luke 22:24-27.

<sup>151</sup> Matt 22:21. Not Caesar *or* God, but Caesar *and* God. While the coins stamped with Caesar’s image belong to him, Christians are to give God that which is stamped with the image of God—their lives (Gen 1:26-27).

<sup>152</sup> Ref. John 17:11-16.

<sup>153</sup> Matt 26:52; also John 18:3-8.

<sup>154</sup> Matt 26:62-63; 27:11.

<sup>155</sup> John 18:36.

<sup>156</sup> John 19:10-11.

<sup>157</sup> Luke 23:2-4; also Matt 27:29.

on political charges as “King of the Jews,” Christ died on the cross, a sign of political execution.<sup>158</sup>

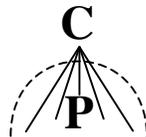
As disciples of Christ, Christians are to live the life of Christ. They are to practice the “politics of Jesus.”<sup>159</sup> In Christ’s own words: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”<sup>160</sup>

**Sketch of a Reasoned Stance on the Relation of the Christian and Politics**

With a consideration of biblical principles and cases, as well as a backdrop of historical antecedents, we return to the fundamental question: How then should a Christian relate to politics? While each of the five positions earlier noted (see Figure 1) can help us to understand particular facets of this relationship, and could perhaps become an appropriate response in a given situation, it would seem that there should also be an overarching perspective which can guide the Christian in his or her relation to politics.

This response might be described as a position of Lordship—the recognition that Jesus Christ is Lord of all<sup>161</sup> and that human society in each of its dimensions must be cognizant of His sovereignty (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Relationship of Christianity and Politics—The Position of Lordship**

Focus	Depiction	Kingdom View	Orientation Toward Politics
Christ infuses and transforms Politics		The Encompassing Kingdom	Evil is opposed, but politics, as an element of human culture, is affirmed and elevated, by God’s grace.

In this perspective, the Christian acknowledges that the sovereignty of Christ extends to all facets of life, including the political arena. This approach is biblical. Paul, for example, writes, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>162</sup> “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of

<sup>158</sup> Ref. John 19:14; Matt 27:37. P. Hiebert, “Mission in Times of Conflict,” in Victor Adrian and Donald Loewen (Eds.). *Committed to World Mission: A Focus on International Strategy* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1990), 37-45.

<sup>159</sup> Yoder, 1972, 190.

<sup>160</sup> John 20:21.

<sup>161</sup> Ref. Acts 10:36; 1 Cor 1:2.

<sup>162</sup> Col 3:17.

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God.”<sup>163</sup> The believer then sees himself not as possessing dual citizenship, but as a citizen of the *encompassing kingdom* of God.

In this perspective, politics is not viewed as a demonic domain (Rejection), nor as a necessary evil (Paradox). On the other hand, it is not seen as basically neutral, but deficient (Critical Collaboration), nor as essentially good (Synthesis). Neither is politics viewed as an arena on which the will of God must be imposed by human agents (Domination).

Rather, the Christian recognizes that mankind is embroiled in the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan.<sup>164</sup> This great controversy perspective acknowledges manifestations of both good and evil in each aspect of society, including politics. Thus, in the Christian worldview, evil is opposed, yet human culture is affirmed and elevated, by the grace of God.

This position of Lordship may call for involvement in social causes—caring for the suffering and anguish of others, speaking out for social justice. It may include non-violent activism, particularly where moral issues are involved. Forms of political activism that could fit particularly well within this perspective include roles of advocacy, mediation, and conciliation. The Lordship perspective may involve casting one’s vote in favor of specific issues or platforms, rather than merely as a reflection of partisan alignment. Provided that one does not compromise biblical principle, it may lead a Christian to hold political office in order to better address injustices or enhance the well-being of others. Finally, while the Christian is to respect earthly government, there may be occasion for civil disobedience when the requirements of the state conflict with those of the kingdom of God.

The position of Lordship thus recognizes that there are perils as well as opportunities for the Christian. There are dangers of compromise of principle and of a corruption of values, as well allowing an involvement with politics to become all-absorbing. At the same time, there are key opportunities for fulfilling the divine mandate to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,”<sup>165</sup> serving as an effective witness for God. This perspective may consequently involve a radical reorientation of thinking—from seeing Christian engagement primarily in terms of political action, to viewing political involvement as the faithful response of witness.

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<sup>163</sup> 1 Cor 10:31; also Ps 47:8.

<sup>164</sup> Ref. Gen 3; Rev 12:17.

<sup>165</sup> Matt 5:13-15; also Isa 43:10.

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While degree and form of political participation may vary for the institutional Church, its leaders, and individual members, the mission of the gospel must always include both the *proclamation*, as well as the tangible *revelation* of who God is. This commission involves standing with voice and vote against immorality and in favor of all that is just and compassionate.<sup>166</sup> It includes caring for God's creation in all of its diversity—even “the least of these my brethren.”<sup>167</sup> It involves furthering the kingdom of God through our witness and through our service. In essence, it is a commitment to live a life *like* Christ, *of* Christ, and *for* Christ in every way.

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<sup>166</sup> Ref. Mic 6:8.

<sup>167</sup> Matt 25:40.