

Election responsibility

By

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“Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. “Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? “Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.”

-Matthew 22:15-22

With the election coming up I thought it would be a good idea to talk about a Christian’s responsibility in local government. I think this is especially important considering that this is one of the most hostile election cycles in American history. Because of this, Christians have become very passionate about their political beliefs and even make claims accusing those who disagree with them of being unbiblical, or even false Christians. Because of this tension I feel the need to approach this topic with extreme caution. On one hand, I do not want to express my opinions so adamantly that I make my political opinions a necessary part of the Christian faith, but on the other hand I don’t want to present an infinitely expansive ideology that claims a moral relativity between all political convictions. So within this paper I will do my best, with as much humility as I can possibly bring to this discussion, to show Biblically what I believe Christians can and should agree upon, and the areas that we have the liberty to disagree with.

Kingdom of Heaven

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

-Matthew 22:21

This is by far one of the most profound statements that Jesus made about our civil responsibilities on this side of heaven. When Jesus made this statement, we have to keep in mind that He was speaking to Jews in the context of a very different covenant

than the one that we as Christians have with God. The covenant that the Jews had with God was both religious and ethnic, without any real differentiation between the two. Meaning, that the old covenant did not just have moral and religious requirements of the people of God, it also contained civil obligations to the specific land of Israel. Laid out within the Law is a type of national constitution that talks about the office of the king and how they were to function. It also mentions boundary lines for the state of Israel, rules concerning warfare, civil laws, criminal laws, economics, court procedures, and so on.

That means, to be under the old covenant meant that you had fealty to a particular nation and governmental structure that was laid out by God Himself. This is why even the closest followers of Christ were convinced that His ultimate mission would be political. They thought that Jesus had come to restore the nation of Israel to its former glory, and they had a lot of precedence to believe this way. Many of the religious leaders that God raised up in the Old Testament from Samson to Elijah had a vested interest in the politics of Israel as well as the spiritual well being of the people. We also have to remember that Jesus was not the only candidate for the Jewish Messiah.

There were actually multiple men who rose to prominence right before and right after Jesus' ministry claiming to be the prophesied "anointed one" (or "messiah") that God had ordained to deliver His people from bondage and re-establish the Davidic monarchy. All of these men started revolts against Rome, and all of these men were brought down by the Roman Empire. This is why Jesus' ministry was so confounding to people, including His most faithful followers.

"And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

-Matthew 11:2-3

Even John the Baptist was confused by the behavior of Jesus. He was in prison for calling out the moral life of a political figure and was anticipating with great joy the eventual collapse of the government that had unjustly imprisoned him. However, the more popular Jesus became, the less concerned He seemed with the political situation surrounding Him. In fact, the more people tried to make Him a king, the more He rejected this behavior.

"Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone."

-John 6:15

He also spent much of His time preaching about the “Kingdom of Heaven”. Because they were so convinced that the Messiah would be a political figure, many took this to mean that Jesus was intending on establishing the kingdom of heaven on this earth through a revolt:

“Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; “nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”
-Luke 17:20-21

Upon hearing this, many others thought that perhaps Jesus wasn’t a political figure at all. Maybe He was simply a type of monk that was only concerned with spiritual matters and had no concern with the affairs of this earth. This is the context for the trap the Pharisees laid for Him in Matthew 22. The crowds following Him had no idea what He was planning on doing. Half of them had written Him off as some strange mystic who was only interested in delivering spiritual wisdom and not in doing anything practical for their circumstances. While the other half believed that He was simply biding His time before He could launch an assault on the Roman government. This is why the religious leaders, who were jealous of His popularity, decided to pose this “question”.

If Jesus revealed a revolutionary intent, we are told that the “Herodians” (those loyal to King Herod) were there to report His words to the government. But, if He took a purely spiritual stance, then the majority of His followers would abandon Him as a monk. But, Jesus’ answer was one of power and moderation. He does not say to rebel against Rome by not paying taxes, but He also doesn’t deny the superior responsibility that a person has towards God. Far from providing clarity, this answer further confounded the enemies of Christ and brought their plans of subterfuge to futility. They were unable to trap Him in His words, and so they made a more direct plot.

Christian Responsibility

As fascinating as this answer would have been to the first century Jew, it is far more interesting and important to the Christians who would follow. Our covenant with God does not have a national dimension to it. Meaning that there is no specific “Christian state” that we are obliged to give fealty to. Christians span the globe and inhabit virtually every nation on earth. Because of this, Christians must answer the question, what obligation, if any, does a Christian have towards the particular nation that they dwell in?

As much as Jesus’ answer was to confound His enemies, much more was His answer meant to address this all important question for the church. By wording it this way:

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

-Matthew 22:21

Jesus is showing first, that Christians have an undeniable responsibility to the state, and second that this responsibility is actually tied to our responsibilities towards God. The way that He articulates this is actually reflective of another well known statement that Jesus made just a couple verses later in this same chapter:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ “This is the first and great commandment. “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

-Matthew 22:36-40

By wording it as “the second is like it...” Jesus is showing that the Christian commandment to love God is not independent of our commandments to love our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, by wording it this way, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that an indivisible part of our love for God is in loving our fellow man. The apostle John makes this point unavoidable when he says:

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.”

-1 John 4:20-21

These passages ought to resolve a tension that many Christians feel between the spiritual and the material. It is often easy on one hand for Christians to become so consumed with the affairs of this world (especially political ones) that they subordinate their spiritual identity under their earthly identity. They make their political priors the center of their moral convictions and they have their Christian identity serve their political one. On the other hand, many Christians can think that their spiritual identity is so important that nothing that they do in the material world really matters. They look at the political landscape as a mess that they have no responsibility towards. From their perspective (and they aren't far off) politics are so corrupt that no part of our Christian identity could ever have anything to do with our political beliefs. They might even

believe that the government is so corrupt that the best way to deal with the political landscape is to ignore it altogether.

But in these two passages we see that both perspectives are wrong. When Jesus says render to “God the things that are God’s.” He is clearly demonstrating that our responsibilities to God are far more important than our responsibilities to this world. After all, a denarius might bear the image of Ceasar, but Ceasar himself, along with every man and woman that has ever existed, bears the image of our creator. Therefore, we owe Him the totality of our being. Every element of who we are belongs to our Creator and therefore every thought, belief, and action should be subordinated to the glory of God.

*“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
-1 Corinthians 10:31*

However, this loyalty that we owe to God does not stop at our hearts, our minds, and our souls, we are also called to love God with our “strength” (which includes our bodies and our behavior). This means that our political ideals, and our behavior in the political landscape must be brought under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. While it is wrong for Christians to make Christ a mascot for their political priors, it is equally wrong to leave Him out of the political conversation altogether, or to use their faith as an excuse to ignore politics altogether.

Freedom and Responsibility

*“And the children of Israel said to them, “Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”
-Exodus 16:3*

Before I go any further in describing what our specific responsibilities are, I think it's important to point out a strange phenomenon that we see repeated in the Bible, and that is man's rejection of freedom. There is a modern myth that is propounded in the west that people genuinely want to be free. I remember serving in Afghanistan under this belief as well. We thought we were liberating the people there and that they would be happy to finally have free democratic elections. But, as we arbitrarily gave the people addresses that enabled them to vote, I found it interesting how indifferent the people were to this opportunity.

It was then that I first started wrestling with the concept that maybe, deep down, man does not want to be free. This thought brought me to re-evaluate passages, like the one above, in this new light. The above passage is not a singular instance. Over and over again, the people of Israel rebel against Moses and God, they extol the supposed “blessings” of slavery, and they actively fight to try to return to Egypt. When I first read these passages, I thought that the people of Israel must be crazy or deceived, I never thought that they were expressing a universal human proclivity.

Think for a second about all the times in history where people legitimately cheered the destruction of democracy in favor of a dictatorship. This tendency extends all the way back from the Israelites who demanded a king, to the Romans, to the Germans, and every communist take-over during the 1900’s. What I failed to realize is that people don’t actually want freedom, they want to be happy and safe and freedom tends to get in the way of these goals. The reason for this truth was articulated by Solomon in his book Ecclesiastes:

“The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep. There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: Riches kept for their owner to his hurt. But those riches perish through misfortune; When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand.”

-Ecclesiastes 5:12-14

Solomon considers the rest of the poor to be more valuable than the luxury of the rich. Though the rich may enjoy many luxuries with their wealth, they also have many responsibilities that come with their wealth. They have to manage their money which they might lose due to a bad investment, laziness, or general misfortune. They have to worry about setting up a good inheritance for their children who might become spoiled by the wealth and squander what they inherit. And if the wealthy man fails, many other people are dependent on the businesses and investments of the wealthy man. The “laboring man” does not have these concerns. He works for a meager wage and is responsible to feed himself and his family, but that is all. Especially in those times, a laboring man would have no investments, nor would he have to worry about housing or the overall economy. He would usually live on the land of his master and would depend on the wages given to him for his labor.

Solomon suggests that it is freedom and luxury that cause true anxiety within a man’s soul. To be free means to be responsible, and to be responsible means to be preoccupied with worry. People will gladly give away their freedom to religious leaders, governments, and even wealthy people around them to be “freed” from their

responsibility and to enjoy “rest”. One Roman poet named Juvenal understood this pretty well and put it this way:

*"They will surrender their freedom for bread and circuses."
-Juvenal*

All Rome had to do was to provide entertainment (circuses) and food (bread) and people would gladly give away freedom and enjoy the rest that comes from an abdication of responsibility.

Many today are blind to this connection. We talk so much about our “rights” but we don’t understand that every right that we have as citizens comes with a great responsibility. We tend to focus only on the benefits of citizenship and we completely ignore what it means to be responsible for the freedoms we possess. Because we don’t understand this connection very well, we don’t understand that by giving the government more power to provide for our needs, we are also giving up large portions of our freedom. To put it another way, liberty over our finances and our careers comes with the necessary responsibility of taking care of our own financial needs. A government (which has no means of getting money except through taxes) has the ability to provide for our needs is also a government that is taking away the rights of individuals to hold on to their own capital.

Democratic Responsibility

Which leads us to a very unique responsibility that we have under a democracy. In a dictatorship, like the one that the early church was under, the individual responsibility to the government was pretty low. Essentially it was only paying taxes and obeying the laws that did not contradict the laws of the Scripture. Beyond this, the early Christians were a persecuted minority and had very few liberties, and therefore had almost no civil responsibility.

Even so, it is important to note that the early church was far from passive about the political situation that they found themselves in. They were vocal about their disagreements with Roman practices and had many grand acts of civil disobedience against key Roman institutions, including the debauched theater, the colosseum, the temple system, the idolatry of Caesar, and so on. They were also not shy about publicly denouncing the excesses of Roman authorities and suffered dearly for their resistance.

As interesting as it is to study the early church and how they interacted with the Roman government, (there is much to say about civil disobedience and the Christian

responsibility to resist unjust laws), but for the purposes of this paper it is important to state that we are a part of a very different system. When the Bible talks about civil responsibilities it makes a distinction between the civil authorities and the citizens. Take this interesting passage from the book of Hosea:

“They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops, And burn incense on the hills, Under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, Because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, And your brides commit adultery. “I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, Nor your brides when they commit adultery; For the men themselves go apart with harlots, And offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled.”

-Hosea 4:13-14

Notice that God does not hold the women accountable for the idolatrous behavior that they were participating in. The reason is because the women had no political authority and were subsumed by a system that corrupted their morals. However, God does hold accountable the people who had a hand in shaping the system:

“Hear this, O priests! Take heed, O house of Israel! Give ear, O house of the king! For yours is the judgment, Because you have been a snare to Mizpah And a net spread on Tabor.

-Hosea 5:1

In other words, God takes seriously, and even judges those who have authority to shape the policies of a given society. This responsibility is so vast, that God even judged pagan nations for failing to execute justice. It is for this reason why the early Christians were so interested in calling out those who had authority in their society. It wasn't just because they wanted to convert these officials, (though they wanted to do this too), it was because they had genuine concern for these individuals and the judgment that they would receive if they ruled improperly, creating injustice where there should be justice. For one example of this, look at how an early church father named Augustine rebuked the casual usage of war in his day:

“But, say they, the wise man will wage just wars. As if he would not all the rather lament the necessity of just wars, if he remembers that he is a man; for if they were not just he would not wage them, and would therefore be delivered from all wars. For it is the wrongdoing of the opposing party which compels the wise man to wage just wars; and this wrong-doing, even though it gave rise to no war, would still be matter of grief to man because it is man's wrong-doing. Let every one, then, who thinks with pain on all these great evils, so horrible, so ruthless, acknowledge that this is misery. And if any one

either endures or thinks of them without mental pain, this is a more miserable plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost human feeling.”

Augustine of Hippo - “The City of God”

Feeling the heavy weight of the cost of war, Augustine appeals to the conscience of those in power to consider the evils of war before engaging in it. He doesn't say that war should be outlawed because it is evil, but acknowledges that governments must sometimes engage in necessary evils (more on this concept later). This means that through his concern for the rulers, and the people subject to their rule, he openly rebukes “unjust” warfare.

But, as stated before, we are in a very different situation than Augustine. For Augustine, this was the only way that he could help shape policy, and he took that responsibility so seriously that he risked his safety to call out the excesses of those in power. For us today, we are not passive observers of the policy that is shaped, we are active participants in the democratic process. This means, in a certain lesser sense, the level of responsibility that we have is somewhere between the responsibility that the Bible spells out for rulers and the responsibility that the Bible expresses for average citizens.

We are not like the first century Christians, or even like the Jews in the Old Testament, who had no say over government policy. We vote for our representatives who shape policy, and we even directly vote on ballot propositions that shape the laws around us. The reason why I say that we don't carry the same level of responsibility as the government officials is because we can only vote while someone in power can actively effectuate and craft policy. So I don't want to overstate our responsibility, but I do want us to feel the gravity of our situation.

“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

-James 4:17

When I was a teenager I had a very naive and overly optimistic view of the government and the military. When I was in the military I was quickly disillusioned from my previous optimism and instead took on a cynical view of the government as a whole. This led me to spend years of my life not voting and I genuinely believed I didn't have any civic responsibility. I believed that the rulers over me would have to answer for their behavior, but that the whole system was so corrupt that I would make myself more impure by participating in it at any level. I didn't accept the idea that we should vote for the lesser of two evils, I thought I was only responsible to vote for people and policies that didn't bother my conscience. During this time, I never really considered that I was neglecting a particular responsibility. I also failed to realize the necessary role that the government

played (no matter how imperfect it might be) and how bad things might get in my negligence.

Necessary Evils

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

-Romans 13:1-7

What is so hard for us to comprehend today is that Paul didn’t write the above sentiment regarding a just and holy government, but instead, about the corrupt Roman government that oversaw the crucifixion of Christ and was gearing up to persecute the Christian church. Instead of lamenting over the corruption of the Roman government, Paul encourages a group of disaffected Christians to keep in mind the necessary role that government, even a corrupt government, plays in the affairs of men. This all important role can be summed up like this: the government exists to protect its citizens from the evil of man.

This is important to understand, because many today have forgotten this main principle. The Biblical view of man is that we are corrupt and fallen from the time of our creation:

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.”

-Psalm 51:5

This doesn’t mean that we aren’t capable of good, only that within our nature and our predisposition to goodness is also a proclivity to get what we want regardless of how we might harm others. This behavior can be seen in children from a very young age, and unfortunately without a higher law governing the behavior of children, it will not go away on its own. The first “law” that a child will experience will come from their parents or gaurdians who are there to help guide their child towards virtue and goodness.

“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.”

-Proverbs 22:15

Biblically, the idea of “foolishness” is not really “stupidity” or “ignorance”, although these terms are related. Instead, we are taught in Scripture that God has created the universe in accordance with His divine nature and attributes. To be “wise” is to understand what these principles are and to live in accordance with them. To use a simple example, part of God’s nature is truth. Because of this, every human community exists on the foundation of truth and honesty. If someone violates this reality by acting in dishonest ways, when they are found out by others, they will be kept outside these communities by the distrust of those who are inside these communities.

This “divine law” of honesty can be considered an absolute one. It is not arbitrary and it is inviolable no matter how unfair we might think it is. The role of the parent then is to show their child that this law exists through various forms of discipline so that they are prepared to live within that wisdom. Beyond that, parents also have to protect their children from the “foolishness” of others. There are unfortunately people out there who would want to oppress, victimize, and violate the innocence of children and it is the parents’ job to protect their children from these threats by standing between their children and the threat itself.

At a larger scale, this is exactly what the government is called to do. The purpose of the law is primarily to inform the conscience of man of God’s “divine law” that we might live in accordance with it and grow in our virtue. But, to those who refuse the wisdom of God’s law, they can resist the law of the government and be subject to the government’s “sword”. The government also uses this “sword” to protect its citizens from the predations of other nations and seeks to maintain order and liberty within its own borders.

Someone might complain that it is unjust that God has given this authority to imperfect vessels like parents and the government. To put it another way, if parents and governments are themselves fallen individuals who are filled with corruption and ignorance; that means that they will, often, fail to create just laws that correctly inform the conscience, and they will also be prone to enforcing their rules in unjust ways. Even the just laws that they do create will have loopholes within them that still allow for injustice. Wouldn’t it be better if God Himself judged us?

“Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

-Exodus 33:3

Unfortunately, if God judged mankind, no one would be able to live in the nation that He ruled over. We are all filled with corruption, and therefore, if we received laws directly from God they would be perfect and preclude participation by anyone who wasn't perfect themselves. Governments need to be made up of imperfect people who make imperfect laws because we can not yet bear the full law of God. I think that the Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas put this point best:

“The purpose of human law is to lead men to virtue, not suddenly, but gradually. Wherefore it does not lay upon the multitude of imperfect men the burdens of those who are already virtuous, viz. that they should abstain from all evil. Otherwise these imperfect ones, being unable to bear such precepts, would break out into yet greater evils: thus it is written (Ps. 30:33): “He that violently bloweth his nose, bringeth out blood”; and (Matt. 9:17) that if “new wine,” i.e. precepts of a perfect life, “is put into old bottles,” i.e. into imperfect men, “the bottles break, and the wine runneth out,” i.e. the precepts are despised, and those men, from contempt, break into evils worse still.”

-Thomas Aquinas - “The Summa Theologica”

Since we are not moral enough to stand beneath the perfect law of God, we need an intermediary that communicates the highest form of God's law that we can bear. A government can then be unjust by giving the people a law that either deviates too much from God's divine law, or accords with it too perfectly. The first part of that statement is obvious, if the government gives a law that actually prevents people from serving God out of a clear conscience, they have violated their role and created an unjust law that does not bind the conscience of the people.

However, if the government gives a law that is in some sense “too just” they have also violated their role and created a system of lesser liberty and greater injustice. Take lying again as an example. It is good that the government recognizes the wrong of lying and creates laws that regulate lying within their country. However, what happens when a government legislates this too perfectly? We are already seeing this happen in our society today. If the government can now punish all forms of lying, then they can monitor their citizen's online activity looking for “misinformation”. Now, not only can the government designate speech that they don't like as “false” but they can also legislate the speech of their citizens to a tyrannical level.

However, this doesn't mean that the government shouldn't legislate honesty at all. For

instance, it is illegal for a person to lie under oath in a court of law, or to violate a written agreement. These laws are just because they protect the citizenry from some of the worst consequences of lying without overstepping their authority. This is the delicate balance that the law is supposed to work towards. It must manifest enough of God's wisdom to make men better, but it must limit its scope enough to provide men with liberty and to exclude the government from having too much authoritarian control. This is what is necessary to create men who are truly virtuous. We have to train our conscience through a given law, but also be free enough to practice that law through our own free will.

As imperfect as the government might be, this is essentially what they are here to do. I think one of America's founding fathers, James Madison, put this point the best:

"But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

--James Madison - "The Federalist Papers" Number 51

If the government was removed, and all human law was destroyed, we would not be made better by this action, but worse. Lawlessness would reign, and even those who truly desire to be godly would be cut off from the necessary protection and imperfect intercession that human governments provide. However, since the government is made up of corrupt men, there has to be a mechanism that keeps their wickedness in check:

"Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

--James Madison - "The Federalist Papers" Number 51

In my naivete I had never considered this. I saw the world in black and white and couldn't understand the purpose for "necessary evils". I thought that only the just should rule us, not understanding that this itself was a utopian fantasy that could never be. We will always be ruled by imperfect men as long as we are in an imperfect state. The

beauty of our system of government is that it wasn't primarily designed to get the "right" people into office, but instead it was designed to give the people enough of a voice to exhort those in office to do the right thing, regardless of whether they agree to that right thing or not. So yes, government is an evil, (as even our founders acknowledged) but it is unfortunately a necessary evil. Because of this fact, I really think the point is unavoidable, we are held accountable by God to do the best we can within the system that we live within.

Voting Our Principles

"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

-Matthew 18:18

When I say something like this I am always reminded of my role as a pastor. There are many implications of the above passage, but one of the key ones is that the leadership of the church has a role in informing the conscience of those we are pastoring to honor God in this world. Which means that by sharing something as a pastor, I am using my authority as a pastor to either bind on the conscience of the people who trust me a law, or to loose their conscience from a particular principle. As spoken before, the people also share responsibility in informing themselves and growing their own conscience before God, but I will still be held to a higher standard as a pastor.

"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

-James 3:1

There are many pastors today who do not feel the civil responsibility that I described above. While I welcome diversity of thought in the church, and I don't think that such views are heretical, I do feel the weight of the responsibility heavy upon my own conscience and I haven't heard a very good response to the points I have laid out above. So, I feel compelled to share that view with those who have trusted me to shepherd them.

That is true for what I have already shared, and it will be doubly true for what I am about to share. When it comes to elections in our country, I do believe that it is inappropriate for Christians to become too invested in individual politicians. Our system of government was created by conflict. Our founders realized that people become too cozy with one another, it is easy for corrupt relationships to form that subvert truth and decency. If I as a pastor began to cultivate professional relationships with certain

politicians it would be far too easy for a corrupting relationship to form, no matter how well meaning I might be. I would feel personally invested in the relationships that I formed, and therefore it would be much easier for me to compromise my principles in light of a relationship. This compromise might cause me to promote ideas from the pulpit that provide stolen biblical support for unbiblical ideas.

Also, remember that the people that we elect are our representatives. They are not there to represent us on a personal level, but instead they are there to represent our *principles* in the halls of power as they craft and effectuate particular policies. For this reason, while on a moral level I might care about the personal morality of a politician, I am much more interested in whether or not they will properly represent principles. Of course if you can find a politician that reflects your moral ideals as well as your principles then you should definitely vote for them, but if you have to choose, it is better to choose policy over personal moral preference.

That being said, are their particular principles that Christians can agree upon? I think there are several and I will do my best to lay them out here.

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

-James 1:27

When Christians today say that religion and politics shouldn't mix, while this is a noble sentiment, it is also one that is a little on the naive side. It is true that we must honor the words of Christ when He made a distinction between the role of the church and the state, and the responsibility that a Christian has towards the state. However, it is easy to take this principle too far and falsely believe that our relationship with God has no bearing on our political convictions. The truth is that all political convictions come from our ethical and moral convictions, which descend ultimately from our beliefs about God.

When James says that “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble...” He is uniting our moral concern for the powerless in the society to our fidelity towards God. The closest analogy I can use to help us understand this concept would be the trinity. It is important that we believe that God is One in being. Failure to grasp this concept would push us towards polytheism, since we are commanded to worship the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit. However, if we fail to accept the distinction between the persons of the trinity, we fall into a different heresy called “modalism”. This false belief is when we think that all persons of the trinity are really just different “modes” of a “unitarian” God as opposed to distinctive persons of a “trinitarian” God.

The relationship between faith and politics works the same way. If we only accept the distinction between religion and politics, then we fall to an inactive faith that can't inform your decisions or convictions in the real world. However, if you remove the distinction and make your faith synonymous with your politics, then you develop a form of Christian nationalism that defines your faith by your politics. Only in recognizing the distinction and the unity between these two concepts can we find harmony.

While I think it is possible to push this principle pretty far into the political landscape, I also believe that Christians have quite a bit of latitude within these convictions. As long as Christians are legitimately coming to their political convictions out of a desire to honor God in their politics I think that we can have healthy debate within the church. For the purposes of this paper though, let me focus on four key political ideas that I do believe Christians ought to be able to agree upon: life, liberty, the economy, and foreign policy.

Life

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

-Genesis 1:27

The belief in intrinsic human worth comes from the above passage and is uniquely held by Jews and Christians. All other worldviews that man has produced over the centuries have included a tiered system of human worth, usually placing the elites on the top, citizens below them, women below them, slaves below them, and foreigners at the very bottom. Because of this, other worldviews have formed laws that protect life on the basis of this tiered system. One of these cultures would have no qualms about sacrificing or enslaving a foreign people because, in the eyes of the state, they had no intrinsic worth and therefore did not have an absolute right to life.

Judeo-Christian cultures uniquely saw the universal right to life as being absolute for all people since we all bear the image of God. This doesn't mean that these cultures always lived up to this ideal, sadly they often didn't, but it does mean that they held this ideal and therefore can be judged by it. This means that Christians in our culture bear that same ideal and should orient our politics towards perceiving all human life as being uniquely valuable before God.

This does include the way that we wage warfare, which is why the west has uniquely bound themselves towards Augustine's theory of "Just War" which includes particular grounds for declaring war, conduct in carrying out war, and guidelines on how to end

war. I will talk more about this when I discuss foreign policy, but it should matter to Christians how we are allocating our countries finances towards warfare in the world and this does relate to how we view human life.

But, as I stated before, the primary responsibility of a government is to its own citizens. Therefore, we ought to care as Christians if the government is failing to recognize the intrinsic worth of a group of people. Historically this is why Christians fought to abolish slavery and end segregationist policies in the south, and that is why I strongly believe that Christians should oppose abortion.

Some today argue that life in the womb lacks rights because of certain philosophical considerations, like they lack autonomy or sentience, but these criteria are not what give human life worth. To base human worth upon criteria like this, which is arbitrary and lacks a biblical basis, is to wander down a dark road that creates a tiered system of worth like the pagans of old. Once you cross that line, then it becomes very easy to deny the right to life to people who have varying levels of sentience or autonomy.

Many mocked what they deemed the “slippery slope fallacy” but with the rise of programs like “Medical Assistance in Dying” (MAID) that deny intrinsic worth to those suffering with mental and physical ailments and disabilities, and even seek to identify children with these disabilities in the womb so that we can “eradicate” these diseases, such contentions should have lost their validity. The simple truth that the Bible gives is that human life has intrinsic worth, this worth begins when a being can be definitively identified as a human being, which we now know with absolute certainty is at the moment of conception. Which means that the life of the unborn bears the image of God and therefore should have their right to live protected by the state.

Within this belief, I do want to recognize that the law has a profound effect on the conscience of the citizenry. As such, while I condemn the practice of abortion since it denies basic human rights to the unborn, I also recognize that many people born in our country today have been inundated by our cultural understanding that life in the womb is not really a unique life with rights, but instead exists only as a part of the mother. Operating within this false belief, many women, inside the church and outside, have made the tragic decision to end life growing in their wombs. For these women I do have sympathy and hope sincerely that they can discover the power of God’s grace that forgives and heals them.

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

-John 8:32

It may seem compassionate to pretend that an abortion is not the willful destruction of human life in order to “protect” the emotions of those who have participated in this practice, but this is actually false compassion. Jesus promised liberty and healing to those who have come to know the truth, not those who are consoled by well meaning lies. The path to healing is hard, but it is also worthy and contains the legitimate power to heal past mistakes.

Also, as stated before, there can be an argument amongst Christians about the political method that allows for us to accomplish this goal. Some advocate for an “abolitionist” stance that will accept nothing less than total abolition of abortion, while others take a more pragmatic approach that looks for the best and most practical step forward and supports the politician and the legislation that will effectuate that step forward. Politics remains an imperfect system run by deeply flawed people. As such, we should not expect the road forward to be easy or simple, but instead difficult with many nuanced decisions. While we can disagree about the best strategy moving forward, we shouldn’t disagree about the overall point and do our best to vote for policies that recognize the intrinsic worth of all human beings. That being said, the political right has problems on this issue and I think they too lack moral clarity, but in comparison to the left, they are the ones who are open to this argument and have many politicians who are legitimately pro-life.

Liberty

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

-Galatians 5:13

The concept of liberty fits under the same heading as “life” but is a separate issue. Christians ought to value personal liberty and autonomy since it is only through liberty that a person can grow in virtue. In other words, a system that limits freedom and creates a strict and absolute moral order, even if that system is morally right, (which never happens), it would still limit a person’s ability to grow in virtue. In reality, liberty gives a person responsibility, and through understanding and living beneath the weight of our responsibility, we can learn virtue. If you do the right thing merely due to fear of consequences, you are not truly free, and therefore you are not truly good.

The laws that we support as Christians must walk that careful line that Thomas Aquinas describes so well in his Summa Theologica

“...man has a natural aptitude for virtue; but the perfection of virtue must be acquired by man by means of some kind of training... Now it is difficult to see how man could suffice

for himself in the matter of this training: since the perfection of virtue consists chiefly in withdrawing man from undue pleasures, to which above all man is inclined, and especially the young, who are more capable of being trained. Consequently a man needs to receive this training from another, whereby to arrive at the perfection of virtue. And as to those young people who are inclined to acts of virtue, by their good natural disposition, or by custom, or rather by the gift of God, paternal training suffices, which is by admonitions. But since some are found to be depraved, and prone to vice, and not easily amenable to words, it was necessary for such to be restrained from evil by force and fear, in order that, at least, they might desist from evil-doing, and leave others in peace, and that they themselves, by being habituated in this way, might be brought to do willingly what hitherto they did from fear, and thus become virtuous.”

-Thomas Aquinas - “The Summa Theologica”

Aquinas is a complex thinker, but his point above is so important to understand. The law can actually be used to train our virtue, if it properly balances the government's role in our lives. Too much “law” limits our moral training by removing liberty, too little law fails to protect the citizens of a given nation and it fails to give our innate virtue the ability to mature as we practice good behavior in society. As Christians we should be concerned about political candidates and laws that give the government too much power over the finances and thoughts of the people. This strips parents of their God given rights and limits overall virtue in society. However, as stated before with the abortion issue, we should also be wary of candidates and laws that would loosen the purpose of the law so much that it no longer protects basic rights of the citizenry, like the right to life.

There is much more to say about this, but along with all the other issues, there can be good debate amongst Christians about what this practically looks like. But we should all be in agreement that political parties and individuals who seek more power over our lives should be treated with, at minimum skepticism, if not outright rejection. We should be skeptical of both parties, but unless I am missing something, the greater threat to individual liberty is coming from the left right now. This can shift, but right now the greater threat is more concentrated on the left who are pretty open about their desire to erode some of the natural checks and balances of the government. However, as we discuss this issue, we should at least be able to agree that the preservation of individual liberty is a good thing and our political convictions ought to reflect that.

The Economy

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

-James 1:27

When it comes to the economy, the Christian's main concern should be with the most disadvantaged in the society. While talks about the economy can seem to many Christians to be an issue that the church should not be concerned with, it actually ought to concern us at a deep level. Shifts in the economy affect all of us, but the ones who are most affected by these shifts are those who are at the bottom of our society. Beyond that economic liberty is one of the checks in our society towards the power at the top.

When a government gains more power, the first part of the society that they target is the economy itself. Since the government can't generate its own wealth, they increase their power and control by seizing the means of production and the capital that comes from labor through overtaxing the public. This is what every totalitarian regime does, whether they are left wing like the communists, or right wing like the fascists.

When the American founders, especially Alexander Hamilton, designed our form of capitalism, they weren't greedy and corrupt politicians trying to appease their wealthy donors. Remember that elections didn't function like that back before the electoral system was even constructed. Instead, men like Alexander Hamilton came from nothing and saw the unfairness of a system that wouldn't allow people to rise beyond their station. For this reason, and others, he abhorred slavery and wanted to construct a system of economics that allowed for movement between social classes, as well as a system that gave more economic liberty to the people and restricted the economic power of the government.

There are many problems with the capitalist system, I am certainly not calling it perfect. But remember, our system of government *presumes* the imperfectability of our system. Instead of trying to perfect humanity, our system is meant to reign in the excesses of those in power and check different interests in order to maintain relative liberty and the ability to "pursue happiness". This also gives the church the right to maintain our role in the society.

When the government seizes capital from its citizens, it limits our ability to do good and provide charity towards others. It might seem nice to cede the right of charity to the government, but such a decision inhibits true virtue that comes from freewill offerings of charity and supplants the role of the church in society. Man is predisposed to idolatry, when the church gives charity to the individual, we represent the truth of the gospel seen in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, the church points up to God, the government on the other hand points to themselves. As governments become the source of charity, people begin to worship the state, which is exactly what we see right now.

I don't think there is a clear cut answer on the economy, but it is actually a Christian concern to vote for policies and politicians that are seeking to preserve economic liberty and economic prosperity. Not because this is our only concern, far from it, but it does concern our role in the society, and our main religious objective in society, to care for the needs of the widows and the orphans.

Foreign Policy

"Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing?"

-Psalm 2:1

Even foreign policy concerns our religious convictions. First, because if our tax dollars are going to a foreign conflict, this means that we are participating in that conflict, albeit indirectly. War is one of the most evil realities that humanity perpetuates, but since war is sometimes necessary, we should be intent to not treat warfare casually and press our concerns for how war is conducted.

When it comes to the two major conflicts in the world right now, (Ukraine and Russia and Israel and Iran via their numerous proxies), since we are participating in those wars, we should care how they are being conducted. There are many things I could say about each of these conflicts, but for the sake of brevity, let me bring up just two elements concerning these wars, the end goal and the conduct.

When it comes to the beginnings of these wars, both fall neatly under just war theory. Both wars were started by the unjust provocation of an invading force. When it comes to end goals, that's where these conflicts differ. When it comes to Ukraine, it seems as though the current administration doesn't have a definitive end goal, and Ukraine's explicit goal seems more like a fantasy than a reality. In contrast, Israel's goals seem to be pretty straight forward and achievable, though, like all war, at a heavy cost.

Next is conduct. There is a lot of focus on the conduct of the Israeli army. Having fought in Afghanistan and conducted myself against terrorists in urban environments, I can say that Israel seems to be doing their best to limit civilian casualties against a foe that is actively using its civilians as human shields. Ukraine however is getting far less scrutiny. That form of combat is one that I am less familiar with, so I can't give a definitive statement, but since it has been a primarily defensive war within the borders of Ukraine it carries less moral implications. My main contention with that war is a lack of an achievable objective.

The reason why that is so negative is because Russia is not a small power. Although greatly diminished, Russia is a nuclear power with strong alliances throughout the

world. The longer the conflict goes, the more opportunities there are for a grave miscalculation that has catastrophic, global, implications. Israel on the other hand is, at this point, doing their best to achieve peace through strength. Their goal seems to be to destroy the means of retaliation where they can, and show overwhelming strength in order to deter where they can't. While this too carries a powerful risk, it is not to be compared to the risk posed by the Russian conflict, and it also seems more justifiable and achievable.

Our concern as Christians should be the preservation of life at the highest level possible, without moral compromise. When it comes to the election we should seek the candidate who has the most clarity regarding these conflicts, and one who has the higher probability of ending the conflicts. Right now the Biden administration has been at the helm for the beginning of both of these conflicts until now and they don't seem to have provided good clarity. To contrast, Trump had no major foreign conflicts during his previous administration and has outlined a foreign policy with a proven track record, peace through strength. While I do believe Christians can debate these points, I think our overall responsibility towards the preservation of life should make us consider the foreign policy issue paramount when we vote.

Christian Peace in God's Sovereignty

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple."

-Isaiah 6:1

What I would like to end on is the peace that we can have in the knowledge of God's sovereignty. Although the current election is more fraught and contentious than any I have seen in my lifetime, and the stakes are considerably higher than any election that I have seen, we shouldn't lose the overall point of Scripture. In the above passage Israel was going through a change of kings. This would be an incredibly anxious time since the king had basically absolute authority and was appointed not elected. With all his flaws, king Uzziah was a fairly just and Godly king, and you could imagine that the people of Israel would be, understandably, nervous about the new king and what he would be like.

But in this anxious time, Isaiah is given a vision of God, and the first thing he sees is the God of justice and righteousness seated upon His throne. It might not look like it, but God is enthroned in glory even now. Things may seem chaotic to us, but God has a purpose in all that is occurring right now, and is in control. In fact, all of the earth can be separated into two categories, those who recognize the rule of God and those who

don't. Those who recognize God's rule and seek to live in accordance with it, are covered by grace and will be rewarded for their faithfulness. But those who reject the authority of God, are under His judgment devoid of His grace.

While the Christian ought to be nervous and passionate, we should never let our emotions move us to despair, wrath, or anxiety. The way we do this is by daily reminding ourselves of God's sovereignty in this situation. God is in control and He will judge our current political situation. Our role is not to create peace on this earth, but to be faithful to the One who will. While we ought to try our best to honor God in fulfilling our responsibility, it is good to recognize the limitations of our control and to give God the glory that He is worthy of. Only in doing this can we discover true peace and to find, even joy, in the many wonderful blessings that God has given us even in these chaotic times.

"You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You."

-Isaiah 26:3

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

-John 16:33