



Christians and Political Action

Christians getting involved in politics evokes strong emotions in the hearts of people ranging from fear to excitement. Admittedly, Christians have a sometimes troubling legacy when it comes to their political involvement. Since the fourth century, when the Roman Emperor Constantine marched into war under a banner bearing the Christian cross, many people have associated Christian political action with oppression, hatred, and intolerance. Indeed, acts of hatred and oppression in the name of Jesus like the medieval crusades and the Salem witch trials should cause shame and embarrassment for followers of Jesus of every generation.

However, Christian political action has at times been a source of inspiration, heroism, and positive social change. For instance, the "Confessing Church" movement among Christians in Germany during World War II provided the only organized and sustained German resistance to Hitler's Nazism.¹ Moreover, devoted Christian activists like William Wilberforce led the British Parliament's abolition of African slave trade in eighteenth century England. The civil rights movement in America was also spearheaded by many devoted followers of Jesus Christ who truly saw the civil rights movement as an expression of their Christian devotion.

Just how involved should individual Christians and Christian churches be in political and social action? Is such activism in harmony with the Bible? This position statement is designed to help people think through these issues from a biblical perspective and to present Life Bible Fellowship Church's approach to social and political action.

What is God's Role in Human Government?

Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them (Daniel 2:20-21 NIV).

The Bible consistently presents God as being in ultimate control of the events that occur in all the nations of the world. The above text from the Old Testament book of Daniel is especially relevant, because it presents God as the One who is ultimately responsible for setting up political rulers and for deposing them. An example of this from the Bible is the Persian king Cyrus. Although Cyrus did not believe in God, God used Cyrus's political and military decisions as the king of Persia to accomplish God's plan. The prophet Isaiah even calls Cyrus God's "anointed one" and God's "shepherd," even though Cyrus did not believe in or worship God (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). The Bible consistently claims that God is sovereign over the affairs of all the nations of the world.

What is God's Purpose for Human Government?

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

¹See Charles Colson, *Kingdoms In Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing 1987), pp. 125-183 for the often untold story of the Confessing Church movement in Germany during World War II.



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; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Romans 13:1-7 NIV).

This section from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans in the Bible is vitally important for any discussion of Christians getting involved in politics, because it describes God's *purpose* for human government. Every human government ultimately derives its authority to rule from God himself, because God is the Ruler of the universe. Government leaders are described here as God's "servants," even if they are not Christians or even God fearing. *We learn from this Bible passage that God's purpose for human government is to maintain social order by restraining lawlessness, collecting taxes for the public good, punishing lawbreakers, and commending good.* When Paul wrote this letter, he was living under the government rule of the Roman Empire. The Roman emperor at the time was Nero, who was not exactly a paradigm of Christian values or virtue. Nero was well known for his bisexuality, immorality, and was even later suspected of setting fire to the city of Rome. Nero hated the Christian faith, and he ruthlessly persecuted Christians for their refusal to worship the traditional Roman gods. Ironically, Nero was the very emperor who would eventually order Paul's own execution. However, Paul still views Nero's reign as deriving its ultimate authority from God. In this respect, Paul would agree with Christian author John MacArthur: "Even the poorest form of government is better than no government at all."² Paul does not expect the Roman Government to govern according to Christian values, but he does expect it to fulfill God's purpose for government by maintaining social order.

God has a special purpose for human government in His plan. It is vitally important for Christians to understand this purpose, lest we expect the Church to do what God ordains the government to do, or expect the government to do what God ordains the Church to do. In this respect, the Bible itself teaches a kind of "separation of Church and State." This separation, however, is not a wall of separation that strives to prevent Church and State from influencing each other, but it is a separation into distinct but complimentary roles. Former presidential aide and contemporary Christian author Charles Colson reminds us, "To maintain this balance the church and the state must fulfill their respective roles. One cannot survive without the other; yet neither can do the work of the other. Both operate under God's rule, each in a different relationship to that rule."³

What is God's Purpose for the Church?

If God's purpose for government is to maintain social order by restraining lawlessness, affirming good, collecting taxes, and punishing law breakers, what is his purpose for the Church? The Bible tells us:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20 NIV).

The above passage is Jesus Christ's Great Commission to his Church. Being an evangelical church, Life Bible Fellowship Church believes that Jesus Christ's Great Commission is God's purpose for the Christian Church. This Great Commission is to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people everywhere, inviting them into a relationship with Jesus, receiving them into the Christian community through baptism, and then helping them grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. At Life Bible Fellowship Church, we summarize our commitment to the Great Commission with our church mission statement:

²John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 43.

³Colson, *Kingdoms In Conflict*, p. 121.



Life Bible Fellowship Church's Mission Statement:

We believe God has called us to reach unchurched people from the Inland Valley and beyond with Christ's love, and to help them grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who wholeheartedly love God and others.

This mission statement describes our congregation's reason for existence. Everything we do as a congregation (including any social and political action) must find its basis in this mission statement. Only by maintaining our unwavering commitment to our mission will we be faithful to Jesus Christ's Great Commission for his Church.

What is God's Perspective on Social Problems?

No one doubts that many social problems plague our nation. Rising crime rates, escalating divorce rates, the denigration of human life, substance abuse, poverty, and sexual promiscuity increasingly characterize our culture. Violence seems to intrude on our lives more and more, especially in places once thought to be safe like our homes, our workplaces, and our schools. We long to return to times when these social problems were less widespread in our culture.

Christians often wonder what they can do to curb this downward spiral into moral chaos. Should the Church corporately speak out against the moral problems within our culture? How involved should the Christian community be in providing solutions to these problems? What do Christians uniquely have to offer our society? To answer these questions, we must understand the Bible's teaching about the *root cause* of moral problems within human society. The testimony of the Bible is quite clear about this issue:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile...The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen (Romans 1:16, 18-25 NIV).

The clear teaching of the Bible is that *all* social problems find their ultimate root cause in human sinfulness. Because "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23), human sinfulness is universal to every nation and culture. Every human society is plagued by its own social problems. According to the above passage, the existence of social problems in society is not the *cause* of God's judgment against a society, but it is rather the *result* of it. The entire human race finds itself under the power of sin (Romans 3:9), and thus in desperate need of reconciliation to God. The Bible claims that the *only* remedy to this desperate situation is the good news of Jesus Christ, which Paul calls "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

Picture social problems like violence, abortion on demand, domestic abuse, sexual confusion, racism, and so forth as the *fruit* of this universal human rejection of God described by Paul in the first chapter of Romans. Simply condemning this fruit as bad does not change it into good fruit. Nor does picking the fruit and throwing it away, or even cutting down a branch from the tree change the nature of the fruit. Instead, the *root* must be changed to produce good fruit. If the root problem is human sin (as the Bible



clearly claims), then this root can *only* be changed by helping people become reconciled to God through the good news of Jesus Christ. Thus, while our government fulfills its role by seeking to slow the growth

of the bad fruit by maintaining social order, only the Christian Church offers a means for transforming the root. No human government is able to change the root, no matter how moral and just that government might be. Within the role God has assigned to human government, the best we can hope for is a government that slows the growth of the bad fruit by effectively maintaining social order. But the Church has a message that can actually produce new fruit, the “fruit of the Spirit” which includes such social virtues like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). In this sense, the government and Church play complementary roles in the welfare of society, as the government seeks to slow the growth of the bad fruit by maintaining social order, which in turn enables the Church to thrive so it can introduce people to the good news of Jesus Christ.

The best way the Christian Church serves society and curbs social problems is by producing more and better followers of Jesus Christ. The more people who are reconciled to God through Christ and the better these people follow Jesus as his disciples, the less bad fruit there will be and the more good fruit there will be in a society. This is why Jesus called his followers “salt” and “light” in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). According to Jesus in this passage, we don’t do things to act as salt and light, but our very presence as followers of Jesus is salt and light for our society. Although at times the Church can perhaps assist the government in curbing the growth of the bad fruit, the Church must put its best efforts, energy, and resources into fulfilling Jesus Christ’s Great Commission, so it can provide society with individual people who produce good fruit that is good for the welfare of society.

What is the Role of Judeo-Christians Values?

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. (1 Timothy 1:8 NIV)

I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death (Romans 7:7b-11 NIV).

Despite our nation’s heritage, people in our culture are less and less concerned about Judeo-Christian values. By “Judeo-Christian values,” we mean the moral values that are found in the ten commandments, which are found in both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. Both Judaism and Christianity embrace these ten commandments as an expression of God’s moral absolutes for the human race. Many of our nation’s founding fathers believed that the moral values found in the ten commandments were essential to the proper functioning of our society.

Because of a decline in believing in these moral absolutes, we are tempted to think that by proclaiming these values and calling people to live by them, we can bring about moral transformation in our nation. However, the Bible cautions us against viewing the ten commandments alone as an agent for moral transformation. The apostle Paul cautions us to use God’s law “lawfully.” In Romans chapter 7 Paul describes his own experience with the tenth commandment (“Thou shall not covet”). Merely knowing the tenth commandment stirred within Paul covetousness he previously did not know existed. For people who are alienated from God and still under the power of sin, God’s moral standard is in itself unable to empower them to fulfill that moral standard. Proclaiming the moral standard can in some cases actually cause people to become less moral, as Paul himself experienced with the tenth commandment before becoming a Christian. According to the Bible, the only way a person can actually live in conformity with



the ten commandments is by being transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ. This means that the Church should avoid proclaiming Judeo-Christian values apart from the good news of Jesus Christ. We must beware of giving the impression that people can meet God's moral standard apart from the transforming work of Jesus Christ.

Who is God's Chosen Nation?

For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Romans 9:3-5 NIV)

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1 NIV).

Patriotism is a good thing. Christian author C. S. Lewis was right to call love of country a basic human love.⁴ However, Lewis was also quick to point out that patriotism can easily become destructive, even evil, if not submitted to a higher love for God. American Christians should love their country. However, they should always love God more.

Some Christians believe what is sometimes called "replacement theology." Replacement theology teaches that all of God's promises to the Jewish nation of Israel were forfeited when Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah. According to this way of thinking, God's promises were taken away from Israel and transferred to the Christian Church. Consequently in this way of thinking, the Church is "spiritual Israel," the recipient of the blessings and promises God originally made to "literal Israel" in the Old Testament. People who hold to this way of thinking freely transfer Bible verses originally describing the Israel to the Church. Other replacement theology believers go even further. *These people claim that the United States America has replaced Israel (or is equal to Israel) in its unique status as God's chosen people.* These Christians freely transfer Bible verses originally describing Israel to America. Bible verses frequently transferred in this way include 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Psalm 33:12.

At Life Bible Fellowship Church we respectfully disagree with all forms of replacement theology. The above verses from Romans remind us that God only has *one* special, covenant nation: Israel. Even though the Jewish people did not accept Jesus as their Messiah, God has not rejected Israel. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that America has a special, covenant relationship with God. Thus, we believe it is inappropriate to transfer Bible verses originally describing Israel to anyone other than Israel. Because we believe God has not rejected Israel, we respectfully disagree with many of our nation's founders who embraced replacement theology. Replacement theology is what is behind many of our founders' description of America as "the New Jerusalem," "a city set upon a hill," and "a garden in the wilderness".⁵ Although many of our nation's founders saw themselves in this way, we must adhere to the Bible's teaching that only Israel can lay claim to this unique status. America has not replaced Israel, nor has God entered into a covenant relationship with America. However, as Americans we do love our nation, and we rejoice that our experiment in democracy has become a source of inspiration to many other nations in their quest to find freedom from tyranny.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 40-49.

⁵See Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, pp. 118-19. Also see Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1983).



What is Responsible Christian Citizenship?

American statesman Daniel Webster was right in saying, “Whatever makes people good Christians, makes them good citizens.”⁶ Since being a follower of Jesus Christ means being fully devoted to him in every area of life, surely this includes our citizenship. The Bible offers very clear guidelines about how to express our devotion to Jesus in our citizenship.

Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21 NIV).

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to 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. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king (1 Peter 2:13-17 NIV).

The Bible presents our citizenship as a significant aspect of our Christian devotion. Even after becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul still valued his Roman citizenship (see Acts 16:37; 22:22-29; 25:11). Our minimal duties as Christian citizens are to respect, obey, pray for, and honor our government officials. This includes paying our taxes honestly, not slandering or maligning our civic leaders, and supporting our military and law enforcement personnel. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul emphasizes the importance of praying for our government leaders. Living in a representative democracy, responsible citizenship for American Christians also includes voting our conscience, as well as fulfilling civic responsibilities such as jury duty. God also calls us to develop a biblical worldview on the weighty social issues of our day. All followers of Jesus must strive to become better equipped to explain how the Christian worldview addresses weighty moral issues like abortion, poverty, violence, racism, homosexuality, and so forth. Although Christians often have legitimate differences on the best political strategies to address these moral issues, all Christians should strive to hold a biblically informed view on these issues. Every Christian is duty bound before God to express his or her devotion to Christ by living as a responsible citizen of our nation. Some Christians might also receive a special calling from God to serve in civil service, as political activists, or as elected officials. The Christian Church should love and encourage these Christians, recognizing that their calling is a difficult and challenging one. The Church should also hold these Christians accountable to live lifestyles that honor Christ and exemplify appropriate Christian character, as well as helping them to keep a clear vision of the different roles of government and the Church.

What is Our Responsibility When Church and State Conflict?

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:18-19 NIV).

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21 NIV).

⁶Quoted in Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, p. 243.



We should not be surprised when the values of our society are in conflict with our values as Christians. As we saw earlier in our discussion of Romans chapter 1, this is the consequence of living in human society. According to Romans 1, no human society lives consistently with the values of God's kingdom. However, occasionally there may come times when a government passes a law that is in direct contradiction to the Christian faith. When this occurs, Christians are not obligated to obey that law. However, this only applies when the government *commands us to do something the Bible clearly forbids*, or when the our government *forbids us from doing something the Bible clearly commands*. For example, some governments forbid Christians from assembling for worship. Christians in these nations are not obligated to obey this law, since God clearly commands Christians to assemble for worship (Hebrews 10:25). Ultimately these Christians must obey God. During World War II, Christians in the "Confessing Church" refused to disclose the whereabouts of Jewish refugees, even though they were required by law to disclose this information. Many of these Christians were imprisoned for their civil disobedience. During the civil rights movements, many Christians refused to obey segregation laws that they deemed were immoral and contradicted God's command to treat all people with dignity. In cases like these, God's command is a higher law, and we are conscience bound to obey God's law. *However, in these rare cases we must disobey these "unjust laws" with an attitude of respect, love, and non-violence.* In the verse from Acts cited above, two Christians were required by law to stop telling others about Jesus. In a spirit of humility, they respectfully refused to obey that law.

As American citizens, we are free to protest moral evils and government policies we disagree with. However, we must strive to communicate such protest in an irenic attitude of humility and respect. In no way is violence ever appropriate in these cases; we must always seek to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Furthermore, protest must never be done in a way that alienates people from the good news of Christ, condones violence, brings dissention to the Christian community, or infringes on people's basic human rights. Great care must be taken in how we use language in these cases, especially avoiding "warfare" terminology that suggests the government or non-Christians are our enemies. Christian author John MacArthur wisely reminds us, "We need to let go of the notion that culture and government are the enemy. It's simply wrong to blame our country's moral disintegration on political parties, liberal conspiracies, or biased media. They have never been the root of the problem. They are the mission field, not the enemy."⁷

How Does This Apply to Life Bible Fellowship Church?

Because Life Bible Fellowship Church is an evangelical church, social and political action are viewed as a component of our discipleship ministry. Just as Jesus calls us to be fully devoted to Him in our roles as spouses, parents, bosses, employees, neighbors, and friends, He also calls us to be fully devoted to Him as citizens. Just as we seek to equip our members to be faithful spouses, reliable friends, fair bosses, and godly parents, we also seek to equip our members to become responsible citizens.

Because our weekend worship services are attended by many unchurched seekers who are investigating the Christian faith, we do not view our worship services as the best context to accomplish this component of discipleship. This is not to say we avoid controversial social or moral issues in our worship services, but it is to say *we always relate these issues to people's need for the good news of Jesus Christ rather than the Christian's possible political response to that issue.* We recognize that until seekers encounter Jesus Christ, they will not have a biblical worldview as it relates to these issues. Thus, presenting the good news of Christ is always our *primary* focus when we speak to moral and social issues during our worship services.

⁷MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You*, p. ix.



However, outside of our worship services we seek to help our members grow in the discipleship component of citizenship. This is done in small group settings, seminars, special events, and leadership training. By keeping this activity separate from our worship services, we avoid allowing social and political action to become a barrier that prevents unchurched seekers from understanding and responding to the good news of Jesus Christ. We always want evangelism to take priority over discipleship in settings designed with seekers in mind. Our reason for this harkens back to our church's mission statement and our commitment to be an evangelical church that obeys Jesus Christ's Great Commission.

As a church, Life Bible Fellowship Church will never endorse a political candidate. Moreover, we will never endorse the platform of a particular political party. Furthermore, as a church we will rarely endorse or oppose specific legislation, though occasionally our elder board might find a particular piece of legislation to be so important that it calls for an official statement from our elder board. These cases are determined at the discretion of the elder board.

We realize that other Christian churches and ministries approach this issue differently than we do. Some Christian traditions emphasize total withdrawal from all social and political action. Other groups urge higher levels of political and social action than what we emphasize at Life Bible Fellowship Church. We encourage a spirit of love among Christians who hold to different convictions in this area. Differences over this issue should never become a source of dissention or slander between churches or ministries.

Furthermore, we urge followers of Jesus Christ everywhere to exercise a spirit of love and servanthood in the midst of their social and political activity, whatever its level. Paul's words to the Colossian church are just as appropriate to us today:

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:5-6 NIV).

For Further Study

Colson, Charles, *Kingdoms In Conflict*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1987.

MacArthur, John. *Why Government Can't Save You*. Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000.