

THE CHRISTIAN AND POLITICS



INTRODUCTION

The last few years have been one of the most intense political seasons of recent memory in America. In political climates like these, churches (and community groups) can become places of intensity, bitterness, and division. One of the most helpful things community group leaders can do is direct the conversation back to the words of Jesus. In His words (and those of the biblical authors) we find the tools to clarify what is binding for all Christians and where there is freedom to operate in Holy Spirit-guided wisdom. This short discussion can only scratch the surface of this complex topic, but hopefully it can point us in a biblical direction for further study, conversation, and action.

BASIC BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Jesus's short confrontation with the Pharisees and Herodians in Mark 12:13-17 is packed with political-theological wisdom. The Herodians supported the Herods (and therefore, the Roman occupation) while the Pharisees begrudged Rome's occupation of Jerusalem. The Gospel of Mark recounts their conversation this way: *"Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.'* And they brought one. And he said to them, *'Whose likeness and inscription is this?'* They said to him, *'Caesar's.'* Jesus said to them, *'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'* And they marveled at him." Several principles emerge from this interaction (outline borrowed from Mark Dever's sermon "[Jesus Paid Taxes](#)"):

- **Christians should be good citizens.** A pagan state is a legitimate state, and Christians (as foremost citizens of The Kingdom of God) ought to be good citizens and neighbors. Paul develops this idea in Romans 13:1-7; Peter in 1 Peter 2:13-17. He also urges Timothy to pray for kings and rulers that they might rule wisely and establish environments conducive to gospel ministry in 1 Timothy 2:2. See also 1 Peter 2:13.
- **Christians are international.** Jesus doesn't require his followers to only submit to governments that are tied to the one true God of Israel. The gospel can and does go out to every tribe, tongue, and nation (see Revelation 7:9-17, Acts 1:8, Galatians 3:28). The New Covenant is not a "national" covenant, and therefore Christians will find themselves "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Christians will find themselves under all kinds of human governments with a variety of earthly citizenships, united in their citizenship to the Kingdom of God.
- **Christians are finally accountable to God and His Kingdom.** Jesus is saying that certain things belong to Caesar (in this case, your taxes), but certain things belong to God (your entire self). We are to trust Christ in every area of life, and that trust leads us into comprehensive obedience in every area of life. If this is true, then it becomes clear that our obedience/duty to human authorities is limited. When God's Kingdom and human kingdoms come into conflict, we side with God. See examples in Acts 4:18-20; Acts 5:29; Exodus 1:17. This also points us toward a larger theme of the New Testament—the day-to-day life of the church is primarily where Christians serve and work for good. Government and political engagement alone will decidedly not accomplish all that Jesus has called us to.

COMPETING "CULTURAL APPROACHES" FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The Bible gives general principles but few specifics on how Christians should engage broader culture and politics. The events (and writing) of the New Testament, for example, took place under the oppressive rule of Roman emperors Tiberius Caesar, Claudius, Nero, and so on. There is no direct teaching in the Bible for how to participate in a representative government or in how to wield the voting-power we currently possess. Every believer or church will have to come to conclusions about how to do this. Several approaches have emerged throughout Church history, each seeming to capture at least some important pieces of the biblical heart.

The **Anabaptist** tradition, for example, focuses on the **church as a counterculture**. It emphasizes the kingdom of God standing in opposition to the kingdoms of this world, and thus usually encourages separation from and non-participation in politics and the modeling of gospel/kingdom values through establishing an alternative culture. Many streams of **Reformed** tradition focus on **cultural transformation**. These seek to shape culture and society to reflect gospel/kingdom values, including through the politics. The **Liberal/Mainline** tradition tends to focus on the basic **compatibility** between Christianity and the surrounding culture. It often believes that God is working redemptively within and behind cultural movements that have nothing explicitly to do with Christianity and seeks to encourage those for the common good.

There are other approaches, as well. The point for now is that biblical cases can be made for at least some elements of each of these. The question of how a Christian should participate in our 21st century American politics is not a simple one to answer. This should give us grace for others in the church who emphasize different approaches.

COMPETING “LANGUAGES” FOR POLITICAL DISCUSSION

In his excellent, short book titled [*The Three Languages of Politics*](#), Arnold Kling makes the case that the three major political perspectives in modern Western politics—progressivism, conservatism, and libertarianism—“are like tribes speaking fundamentally different languages,” making communication about important political matters almost impossible. He argues that “the language that resonates with one tribe does not connect with the others. As a result, political discussions do not lead to agreement. Instead, most political commentary serves to increase polarization. The points that people make do not open the minds of people on the other side. They serve to close the minds of people on one’s own side.” His three languages are:

- **Progressivism** – Progressives tend to speak the language of oppressor/oppressed, holding that groups or classes of people intrinsically fall into one of those categories. According to Kling, they would be likely to say something like this: “My heroes are people who have stood up for the under-privileged. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the oppression of women, minorities, and the poor.”
- **Conservatism** – Conservatives usually speak the language of civilization/barbarism, describing issues in terms of what will protect the former and defend against the latter. They might say something like this, says Kling: “My heroes are people who have stood up for Western values. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the assault on the moral virtues and traditions that are the foundation of our civilization.”
- **Libertarianism** – Libertarians generally speak the language of liberty/coercion, often focusing on government’s illegitimate restriction of individual agency. According to Kling, they would often say: “My heroes are people who have stood up for individual rights. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to government taking away people’s ability to make their own choices.”

There are, of course, other lenses by which we can view political communication.¹ But this basic idea that there are competing, fundamental “languages” that enable (and disable) people to communicate about politics is extremely important. Hopefully, we can all agree that each of these approaches reflects at least some aspect of biblical teaching. Christians will differ on which, if any, should be prioritized. Hopefully, we are all interested and willing to work to understand other perspectives. And this ambiguity, once again, should give us grace for our brothers and sisters in Christ who have wrestled with the Scriptures and arrived at different points of emphasis.

COMPETING “BINARY OPTIONS” FOR POLITICAL ACTION

One final introductory issue to note is the binary nature of American political life. We have a political system that presently embraces two major parties. In an environment like this, it becomes increasingly tempting to try to force Jesus, the Church, and Christianity into one of the two camps. In recent history, we saw this play out with the “Religious Right” emerging in the late seventies. Many Christians simplistically and uncritically embraced (perhaps “baptized” is the right word) the Republican Party’s agenda as its own. Many others came to perceive that there were many issues that Jesus seemed to care about that were rejected or ignored by the Republican Party, later resulting in significant backlash inside and outside of the church. It seems that among younger Christians (particularly in urban environments like Portland), there is a present trend toward swinging the pendulum to the opposite side—the emergence of something like a “Religious Left,” uncritically embracing the Democratic Party’s platform at the expense of robust and nuanced faithfulness to Jesus. By the nature of a representative democracy like ours, nearly any act of voting (or not voting) will involve some measure of compromise on some number of issues.

Perhaps there is a third way to engage in our polarized political environment—one that follows the example of Jesus in refusing easy categorization. He refused to incite violent political revolution AND refused to fully cooperate with the present political corruption. He submitted to earthly governments AND resisted them when they over-reached. In the end, He never compromised His commitment to God’s Kingdom in the face of any earthly one. This is not to necessarily say a Christian should never vote Democrat or Republican, nor is it necessarily to advocate for or against third parties. This is a call to Kingdom-first politics (as one facet of a Kingdom-first life/identity) that will likely confound a world of polar extremes and tidy categories.

In all of it, remember that we follow a Jesus who embraced both Simon the zealot (for whom a core part of himself was probably committed to overthrowing Rome’s rule over Israel) and Matthew the tax collector (who actively worked against the Jewish people on behalf of their Roman overlords) in his inner-circle of twelve disciples. We can safely assume that they both

¹ For those wanting to take an even deeper dive, check out social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s acclaimed 2012 book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. In one section, Haidt argues that sociological research has shown six foundations from which people build their moral (and political) convictions: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. Different people uniquely develop (or don’t develop) their tastes for these—which helps explain why people have such a hard time communicating about morality, politics, and religion.

had to be disciplined both toward love for one another and toward greater faithfulness to Jesus's Kingdom-first values. One of our great hopes for community groups is that they would similarly be a place where people from various backgrounds could come and have their deepest hopes and goals oriented around Jesus.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't](#) **article by Tim Keller** – Keller published this opinion piece in the New York Times in 2018, highlighting ways in which Jesus's values force Christians to think more critically about our political allegiances than is often thought.

[Red State or Blue State](#) **chapter by Scott Sauls** – A chapter from Sauls's excellent book *Jesus Outside the Lines* focusing on how to navigate political division in Christian community. A must-read for community group leaders. Download for free with the link. 17 pages.

[Good and Bad Ways to Think About Religion and Politics](#) **book by Robert Benne** – This short, dense book surveys popular approaches to the relationship between religion and politics. It ultimately puts forward a nuanced, helpful approach for anyone who views political engagement an important part of the Christian life. 113 pages.

[One Nation Under God](#) **book by Bruce Ashford and Chris Pappalardo** - This is short, introductory book that points out some of the problems with our reductionist, extremely polarized, two-party political system in America and argues for a way forward that makes our allegiance to Jesus primary. 142 pages.

[Strange Days](#) **book by Mark Sayers** – Less a book about political engagement and more a book about allowing the Spirit to comfort and empower God's people for faithful, non-anxious presence and witness when the world around us is in chaos. 181 pages.

[Five Views on The Church and Politics](#) **book edited by Amy Black** - Another great book in the great counterpoints series. Representatives of the Anabaptist (separationist) view, the Lutheran (paradoxical) view, the black church (prophetic) view, the Reformed (transformationist) view, and the Catholic (synthetic) view each argue their positions and critique the positions of the other writers. A dense book, but a great entry point into understanding why Christians come to different convictions about how to engage politics. 230 pages.