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CHRIST: LORD OF OUR POLITICS

Romans 13:1-7, and other Scriptures

By

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Romans, Lesson 89

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This message is a revision and update of one that I first gave in November, 1984, on the eve of the election of Ronald Reagan for his second term. Earlier that summer, while we were on vacation in San Diego, we had gone to hear the well-known Christian pastor and author, Tim LaHaye, speak. His message was, "The Second Most Important Day of Your Life." He said that the most important day of your life was when you trusted in Christ as Savior. (So far so good!) But the second most important day, even more important than the day you met your mate, would be that fall when you went to the polls and voted for Ronald Reagan! The implication was that if Reagan was not re-elected our nation was doomed.

While I'm glad that Mr. Reagan was re-elected, I must respectfully disagree with Mr. LaHaye. I do not think that any election is the second most important day of my life. Granted, if our religious freedoms are taken away, life would become very difficult. But, Christianity survived and even thrived under Maoist China, so I think that it would survive here in spite of attempts to eradicate it.

Before we leave Romans 13:1-7, which is the longest New Testament passage dealing with Christians and the government, I wanted to address the topic of to what extent Christians and the church should be involved in politics. Some, such as John MacArthur (whom I greatly respect), argue that we should preach the gospel, but not be much involved in politics (*Why the Government Can't Save You* [Word]). Others, such as Tim LaHaye, imply that getting conservative Christian candidates elected is of utmost importance. So I want to explore the implications of what it means to have Christ as Lord of our politics.

I must make several disclaimers. The first is that I cannot possibly be comprehensive in one message. I must limit my comments on many points where, if time permitted, much more could be said. If you want to read a more comprehensive, biblically-based book, I'd recommend Wayne Grudem's *Politics According to the Bible* [Zondervan, 2010, 619 pages].

Second, my goal is not to give you pre-packaged answers on every issue, but rather to lay down some guidelines to help you think biblically about the subject of politics. And thirdly, I am still in process on some of these matters. Feel free to interact or disagree with me and we can help each other grow in this area.

I'm going to make a foundational proposition; then I'll talk about the nature of civil government in the Scriptures (a quick review of last week); the relationship of the church and the government; and finally, the relationship of individual Christian citizens and the government. My foundational proposition is:

Christ must be Lord of our political views.

That may sound obvious, but it is anything but obvious in practice. People whose lives are otherwise in submission to Christ have a tendency to forget about His lordship when the subject turns to politics. They haven't thought through what the Bible says about politics and our involvement in that area. But if Christ is Lord of all of life and if the Bible speaks about political matters, then we must allow Him to be Lord of our political views.

1. The nature of civil governments: God-ordained and accountable to God.

The Scriptures teach that government is ordained of God and thus accountable to God.

A. Civil governments are ordained of God.

We saw this last time in Romans 13:1b, "For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." When Paul wrote this, the godless Nero was the emperor. Since he obviously fell far short of the ideal ruler, we must conclude that there are no exceptions to the principle laid down here, namely, that God has ordained government authority as a part of His plan for this earth. God's purposes for government can be boiled down to two broad areas:

- (1) God ordains government to promote justice for all.

God does this by protecting law-abiding citizens and punishing law-breakers (1 Pet. 2:14). Romans 13:4 talks about the government being a minister of God for good to those who do good, but it bears the sword as "an avenger who brings wrath upon the

one who practices evil." That points to the power of the state to use both capital punishment and (by implication) lesser punishments to promote justice for all.

We also saw last time that the government does this (in part) by legislating morality. Laws against murder, theft, rape, assault, and many other crimes are moral issues commanded in the Bible. Laws should protect citizens from destructive sins (e.g. prostitution, drugs, etc.). The fact that something is illegal will restrain many who otherwise may be tempted to engage in that activity. The real debate is, *which* moral standards should we legislate? (I'll say more on that in a moment.)

(2) God ordains government to promote peace and order in society.

Paul says (1 Tim. 2:1-2) that we should pray for kings and those in authority "in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." This means that the government must maintain adequate national defense so that we are not overrun by a foreign power that would rob us of peace and liberty. On the local level, there must be adequate law enforcement to maintain peace and order. There should be adequate regulation of commerce, medicine, and other areas to protect citizens. Since the government has been ordained of God to promote justice and peace, it follows that...

B. Civil governments are accountable to God.

As we saw last week, Daniel's testimony to both Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar was consistent and clear: "The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes" (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). And, Jesus told Pilate (John 19:11), "You would have no authority over me, unless it had been given you from above." Neither of these rulers were believers in God or part of the covenant nation. And yet Daniel and the Lord Jesus reminded these pagan rulers that their authority was not autonomous. God gave it to them and the implication is, they would have to give an account to Him someday. Part of our role as believers, as we have opportunity, is to remind even pagan government authorities that they rule under God and are accountable to Him. That leads to the thorny issue of...

2. The relationship between the church and the government: Not total separation nor total identification, but education and confrontation.
 - A. Not total separation: There is no such thing as total separation of church and state.

The ACLU and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State are trying to use the First Amendment to mean that religion cannot have any part in government matters. That amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." As you know, these groups have gone to absurd lengths to eradicate any mention of religion in schools, the military, and government.

But the intent of that amendment was not to keep religion out of the government, but to keep the government out of religion. As you know, the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" is not in the U.S. Constitution. It occurs in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association on January 1, 1802 and it reflects Jefferson's interpretation of the First Amendment. Originally the first amendment was added to insure that the federal government have nothing to do with state religious affairs and that the federal government be prohibited from establishing a national church (such as the Church of England). Several of the colonies had state churches. That was not in question.

The same Congress which drafted the Constitution reaffirmed the Northwest Ordinance in 1789 which states, "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of learning shall forever be encouraged" (wikipedia.org). Thus religion and morality (based on religion) were a part of the foundation of our nation's educational system. The founding fathers would be aghast at the current interpretation of the First Amendment which excludes any mention of God or the Bible from public schools and the government.

Since part of the government's God-ordained function is to promote justice, and since, by necessity, that involves legislating morality, it is absurd to talk about a total separation of church and state. The church concerns itself with morality, and so there is much overlap. Freedom *of* religion does not mean freedom *from*

religion. Church leaders and individual Christians should not withdraw from the government or public education under the guise of separation of church and state. On the other hand ...

- B. Not total identification: The church must be careful to be known primarily for the gospel and righteousness, not for a partisan political stance.

We need to remember several things in this regard.

- (1) Evangelism, not political power, is God's primary means of dealing with the world's problems.

If we forget this, we fall into the trap of liberal theologians who promote the social gospel. Since the major problems in this world stem from sin in individual hearts, the only real solution is to see people brought into a right relationship with God. Jesus didn't command us to go and win political races; He did command us to go and disciple all nations. We need to keep this as our main focus. Our hope should be in God and the gospel, not in political power.

- (2) The gospel does include ministry to the whole person, and so we cannot neglect working for just laws.

Dr. Grudem (pp. 49-51) points out many ways that Christians have influenced governments positively throughout history. These changes have also facilitated the spread of the gospel. These changes include outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire; outlawing the gladiator battles in Rome; outlawing branding the faces of prisoners; instituting humane prison reforms; stopping human sacrifice; outlawing pedophilia; granting property rights and other protections to women; banning polygamy; prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India (due to William Carey's influence); outlawing the crippling practice of binding women's feet in China; advancing the idea of compulsory education for all children in Europe; and abolishing slavery.

Thus to say that preaching the gospel is our only business and that the church should not influence the culture through promoting just and righteous laws is out of balance. It is often through Christian efforts to promote justice for the oppressed that God opens the door for the proclamation of the gospel.

- (3) The doctrine of depravity must always be in view when the church touches politics.

We need to be careful not to become overly enamored with a particular political party or candidate. The church should not posture itself as Republican or Democrat. Neither party is thoroughly biblical. There is a mixture of good and evil in both parties. And all candidates (even if they are Christians) are fallen sinners who are susceptible to the lust for power and prestige. We also need to realize that candidates of both parties posture themselves to appeal to large blocks of voters, such as "the Religious Right." We should not be duped or overly optimistic that a candidate who says that he holds to "conservative family values" will actually promote those values once he is in office.

But when one party (or its presidential candidate) endorses abortion and homosexual rights, and the other party (or its candidate) stands on the opposite side, I don't see how a Christian in good conscience can vote for the pro-abortion, pro-homosexual rights candidate. These are *moral* issues, not political issues. The current president has appointed two Supreme Court justices who will invariably rule against Christian moral values. The next president will appoint at least one, if not several, Supreme Court justices who will tilt the Court in one direction or the other. These rulings do affect our country for good or ill, as the infamous Roe v. Wade decision proves. Over 50 million lives have been snuffed out because of that tragic ruling. If the Court rules in favor of "homosexual marriage," it will have devastating consequences for America.

So while the gospel is our main focus, electing officials who will enact laws or appoint judges in line with Christian values is important. The gospel is essential for lasting change, but God has also ordained that righteous laws protect our society. Thus the relationship between church and state is not one of total separation nor one of total identification. Rather, it is:

- C. Education and confrontation: The church must educate and confront the state on matters of morality and justice.

In the Old Testament the prophets called the kings to account on these matters. In the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus confronted the religious and political leaders. The Apostle Paul

confronted Felix, the governor, concerning righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25).

This brings up the difficult question: *How far can we push Christian morality (legislatively) in a secular society?* During the colonial days, some states punished people who traveled on Sunday. I remember going into grocery stores in Texas in the late sixties where you could not purchase certain items on Sunday. Obviously, we don't want to go that far (most of us would be guilty!). A few (thankfully, not many!) advocate imposing the Mosaic Law on our culture, including stoning adulterers, homosexuals, and rebellious children. But how far should we go?

I do not have all the answers on this! Wayne Grudem does an admirable job of addressing an extensive list of specific issues: protection of life (abortion; euthanasia; capital punishment; self-defense and gun ownership); marriage (including incest, adultery, homosexuality; polygamy; divorce; pornography); the family (including child-rearing and education); economics (including taxes; Social Security; health care); the environment (including global warming); national defense (including war; pacifism; homosexuals in the military); foreign policy (including immigration); freedom of speech; freedom of religion; and, a number of other special topics, such as affirmative action, farm subsidies, the National Education Association, Native Americans, and gambling.

Obviously, I can't begin to deal with all of these specific issues here, but I want to lay out a few guidelines. (I'm relying on theologian John Warwick Montgomery, *Christianity Today* [1/23/81], pp. 60, 63; although I've modified his approach slightly.)

- (1) We must distinguish between biblical moral absolutes and gray areas.

Abortion is clear-cut. I do not see how any Bible-believing Christian can argue in favor of abortion, except to save the physical life of the mother. On other issues (economics, the environment, foreign policy, etc.), committed, godly believers differ. On such gray areas you may argue for your position as a Christian citizen, but have the grace to acknowledge that other godly Christians disagree. Also, prioritize your issues. Some things, such as outlawing abortion, save human lives. Other issues, such as divorce laws or

environmental issues or economic policy, may be important, but not as crucial as saving the lives of unborn babies.

- (2) We must not seek to legislate even biblical moral teachings where the value of that teaching will be recognized only by those who have already accepted Christ as Lord and the Bible as God's Word.

We don't want to prosecute blasphemers or adulterers, even though such things violate God's law. To force unbelievers to abide by such laws would be counter-productive in the long run in that eventually people would rebel against Christianity and cast off all influence of the church. This happened with Prohibition.

- (3) We should strive to legislate all socially valuable moral teachings of Scripture whose value can be meaningfully argued for in a pluralistic society.

Laws against abortion; laws protecting women, the handicapped, and the elderly; laws against pornography and child abuse; can all be argued for on the grounds of broad social appeal, even for the non-Christian. Our reason for arguing for such laws is because God's Word is clear on these matters. But these and many other values can be agreed upon by a broad coalition of people, many of whom would not accept Christ as Lord or the Bible as God's Word. If we argue these issues on the basis of scientific, social, and ethical grounds (such as the Golden Rule) which even the non-believer can accept, then if the matter becomes the law of the land, the unbeliever who disagrees with it is less likely to feel that a particular religion has been forced upon him.

- (4) In the political arena, if the choice is between a reasonable compromise that has a good chance of passing versus the uncompromised position which has a poor chance of passing, go for the compromise.

I am not saying that we compromise our moral standards. I am saying that in a fallen world, where we're dealing with unbelievers, we may have to settle for less than God's best. In the area of abortion, for example, although I believe that it is immoral to kill a developing baby simply because it is the result of rape or incest or because it is deformed, I would be quick to settle for an amendment banning abortions except in those cases rather than in hold-

ing out for an amendment which bans all abortions. By accepting the compromise we would end 95 percent or more of all current abortions. Then we can go to work on the other 5 percent. So I'm not saying that we compromise our standards. I am saying that we need to be politically wise.

We have talked about: 1. The nature of government: God ordained and accountable; and, 2. The relationship between the church and the government: not total separation nor total identification, but education and confrontation.

3. The relationship between individual Christians and the government.

Here I'm not focusing on the church as a bloc, but on the individual Christian citizen. First I'll show what is required of all Christians; then what is optional according to gifts and calling.

A. Required of every Christian:

- (1) To be subject to the government unless it asks us to disobey God (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-14; Acts 4:19-20; 5:29; Daniel 1, 3, 6).
- (2) To grant proper honor to those in authority (Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17).
- (3) To do right and cooperate with government authorities whenever possible (Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:15).
- (4) To pay taxes (Rom. 13:6, 7; Matt. 22:17-21).
- (5) To pray for government authorities (1 Tim. 2:1-2).
- (6) To evangelize and disciple government leaders when possible (1 Tim. 2:3-4; Matt. 28:19; Paul's example with Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and others).
- (7) To be informed and vote for candidates and issues which will, to the best degree possible, uphold God's purposes for government (Matt. 5:13-16; Titus 3:1).

The Bible does not address voting directly because democracy was not practiced then. Some Christians argue that we are citizens of heaven and thus should not get involved at all in politics. But we

are also citizens of this earth. Since we are given a say in who rules over us, not to vote is to allow the ungodly to win.

B. Optional for Christians according to gifts and calling:

- (1) To help inform the church regarding candidates or important legislation that relates to biblical issues.

Not all of us have the time to stay informed. If you are so gifted and led, help us out. Let us know about important petitions that we can sign to endorse moral legislation.

- (2) To work as volunteers or supporting staff for politicians who uphold justice and morality.

This is not required of every believer, but it may be the legitimate calling of some.

- (3) To run for political office.

Again, this must be a matter of personal calling before God. It may be on a local level (school board, city council, etc.) or on a state or national level. The church ought to be supplying the government with men and women of integrity who fear God. Government is a difficult place to maintain a strong testimony for Christ. But there are two notable examples in the Bible of men who served well in pagan governments: Joseph in Egypt, and Daniel in Babylon.

Conclusion

Let me return to my foundational proposition:

Christ must be Lord of our political views.

I trust that you now have some tracks to run on as you think through the implications of that statement for your own life.

Application Questions

1. Should the government grant religious freedom for all? What about Mormon polygamists? What about blood transfusions for the children of Jehovah's Witnesses?
2. Does the Bible support a particular political theory of economics (for example, free enterprise vs. socialism)?
3. To what extent should we try to push through legislation on matters like divorce, pornography, gambling, etc.?
4. What biblical truths could be used to argue for democracy as the best form of government?

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