

Does God Care about Politics?

Scripture: John 18:28–38; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8

Introduction

I'm writing this piece a week before the 2004 election, knowing that as you read it we will know who our next president will be. My Republican friends hated Clinton and believe that Al Gore and John Kerry are lying, poll-chasing chameleons. My Democratic friends call Bush an airhead and are insulted by the chutzpah ("nerve") he demonstrates in asking to be the leader of the free world when he is so poorly prepared, having wasted so much of his own life.

Because I love politics so much, I need to say that both sides are wrong. The following section on biblical reflection asks whether God cares about political life. Then, we will come back to this issue of the vote.

Biblical Reflection

Logistics

If we want to consider a biblical perspective on politics, we must begin by asking these three questions:

- First, of what relevance is our political life to God?
- Second, what does God require of us?
- Third, what does God's requirement of us mean to political life?

The first three sessions of this book focus on question one. The last three sessions focus on questions two and three.

God's Interest in Political Life

American politics begins and ends with "we the people." American liberal democracy, the focus of self-government in this nation, has always emphasized individual rights and limited government. There is no authority for government other than the self-governing individuals. But Christian politics has to begin and end with the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Jesus has said that all authority was given to him and Christ established the rule of God over all the earth.

Listen to the conversation between Jesus and Pilate before Jesus was crucified, in John 18:28–38. What does Jesus mean when he says that his kingdom is not of this world? Some Christians interpret this to mean that the “good news” of redemption relates to our private faith life—to our individual walk with God. But does redemption mean even more than this? Look at Jesus’ comment about authority, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). It seems clear that earthly political authority belongs to God. This holds true for every form of authority in life, including the authority that God has entrusted to us as Christian citizens. If our whole life is to be an exercise of Christian faith, politics too is part of the mandate that the Lord gave to us as part of his creation.

This means, though, that we must ask what it is that God requires of us in political life. One can’t address this question more easily than to refer to the prophets Amos and Micah. (Read Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8.)

Engaging the Word

So, does God care about who becomes our president? The truth is, presidential elections are just not where real politics is at. The president of this country has much more power than the Framers of the Constitution intended him to, but over the last two decades his policy-making ability has diminished. The two main presidential candidates are often extremely similar, and on those few issues where they differ, neither candidate will be able to carry out his campaign promises without extraordinary support from both Congress and the courts—the kind of support that we rarely see.

Voting is important because it involves us in the process of self-government, but there are a number of obstacles in the system that prevent our vote from actually effecting policy outcomes. First, a two-party majoritarian political system will always force both parties into the ideological middle. This means that we rarely really have clear differences in the candidate choices that we are offered. Second, the harsh reality of campaign financing means that a huge portion of a president or representative’s term has to be concerned with raising money. This dramatically impacts the policies that an elected official can choose to pursue. Finally, important policy decisions are usually

made by summits involving the iron triangle of business, congressional committees, and Executive branch representatives (often unelected). I'm not arguing that our vote is unimportant, but much too often we convince ourselves that it is in our vote that we self-govern and that the rest of our lives are "apolitical." Nothing could be further from the truth.

All of life is interrelated. Every decision we make has political implications, and politics encompasses every part of our life. When we buy our burgers at a fast-food chain, the Brazilian rain forests weep.



Interested? Rent *The Burning Season* (but close your eyes during the burning scene).

When my stock in General Motors rose dramatically after I bought it several years ago, the welfare rolls in Flint, Michigan increased.



Intrigued? Watch the documentary *Roger and Me* by Michael Moore (but close your eyes during the rabbit scene).

Buying sweatpants at Wal-Mart for yet another failed "fitness" regimen impacts labor conditions in other countries, and driving my beloved '78 Volvo (ten miles to the gallon) shapes our country's involvement in Middle East issues.

Please do vote. It is a good first step toward engaging in representative democracy. But let's not kid ourselves into thinking that voting is the real substance of our civic responsibility. If we are to do justice in this world, if we are to care for our neighbor and respond to Christ's call to feed the hungry and give hope to the hopeless, then it is our obligation to become politically aware and politically active. We have to know how one act will impact another—we can't just be anti-abortion; we have to understand what things lead to an increase in abortion and what things lead to a decrease. We can't just be "tough on crime"; we have to know the relationship between and among poor education, poverty, violence, and drug use. We can't just be "pro-family"; we have to know what exactly causes harm to kids—is it the divorce itself, is it abandonment by a parent, or is it misery in a bad marriage?

You should vote, yes—but don't let the vote be your primary political voice. Instead, vote as a reflection of your commitment to live a life advocating for justice.

Preparation

Those gathered will

- consider the significance of the vote.
- seek to understand the variety of political roles we play as citizens.



Key Questions

- Is voting the most politically significant thing that Christians do?
- Does God want the church and the government to be the same thing?
- Does God believe in the separation of church and state?
- If voting is only a small part of our political life, what else should we be thinking of?

Resources Needed

- Bibles
- Paper (or notebooks)
- Pens or pencils
- Completed copies of the “World’s Smallest Political Quiz” (see page 5 in this guide for more information).

Gathering

Divide into small groups of three or four people and discuss the following questions:

- Did you vote in the last election? Why or why not?
- Did you see a connection between how you voted and your faith? Without saying for whom you voted, discuss some of the issues that seemed to you to be the most relevant.
- Do you vote in ways that are similar to how your parents voted, or different?
- Who shaped your political identity? What part did the church play in developing your political thoughts?
- What do you think are the biggest “justice issues” facing our world today?

The next set of questions is about the culture in which you find yourselves living.

- What things do you care about the most? What worries you?
- What is of most importance to our culture?
- Do you think you will have more or less than your parents?
- If you are looking, where do you find Jesus?
- What is discipleship?
- Was Jesus subversive?

Living the Word

Discuss your results from the World's Smallest Political Quiz (www.self-gov.org/quiz.html) as a group. Do not argue about the questions! Ask each other: What did you answer for question 1? Why? What do you see as the connection between your faith and your answer? Use this as an opportunity to get to know your own political assumptions and those of the group. Do not argue about these issues. Instead, ask the others questions about their responses and share your own questions and beliefs.



As you think about God's concern for political life, consider your role in the city in which you live. During the week, drive through your city late at night—drive through the good parts of your city and the bad parts. Notice who is on the street. Are there people who seem to be lost, lonely, hungry, or poor?

Closing

One person in the group should read Micah 6:8 out loud while all members close their eyes and prepare for prayer. The leader then begins with this meditation:

Leader: We thank you, Lord, for the gift of family, friends, work, shelter, and food.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Leader: We praise you, Lord, for the gifts and responsibility of government and citizenship.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Forgive us, Lord, for our sins of omission when we turn away from those in need.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Forgive us, Lord, for our corporate, communal sin that may lead to injustice we do not see.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Leader: Care for your children and lead us in service to your people.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

The leader offers a short prayer about some matter of political concern or social injustice. All members of the group contribute short prayers of their own in silence or out loud. The leader closes with “Hear our prayer, O Lord. Amen.”

Party Wars: Would Jesus Ride an Elephant or a Donkey?

Scripture: Matthew 13:24–30

Introduction

The title of this session comes from the president of the college where I teach. His name is Bill Robinson, and one of his greatest strengths is the way he connects with students, not only recognizing the issues they deal with but also understanding the way they deal with these issues. When we have a national election, my approach is to ground students in a historical understanding of the Republican and Democratic parties. Dr. Robinson gets to the heart of the matter. He sponsored a talk at his home during the last election and drew students into the discussion with the title you see above. It's an interesting question. If Jesus were alive today, would he be a Democrat or a Republican?

Years ago, when I began teaching political science courses, I asked the students what they thought the relationship between Christianity and politics was. When I was in college in the 1970s we all talked about environmental justice, poverty, and race relations. We assumed that to be a Christian meant you were a Democrat. When I taught in the 1980s everyone talked about abortion and economics. Students assumed that Christians were Republicans. Over the course of the last ten years I have seen students “disassociate” from politics, arguing that Christians should focus on their own personal morality and leave politics to the cynics.

Which perspective is right? Will a Republican sweep in Congress lead to a renewed effort to establish a Christian political culture? Was the health care/welfare reform platform of the Clinton administration parallel to Christlike concerns? How do Christians know which political party and which political policies they ought to support?

No matter which of the three perspectives resonates the most closely to your own beliefs, the fact is that faith has impacted political life throughout the world, and it continues to do so with increasing intensity:

- The American civil rights movement began in the southern black churches.
- Liberation theologies have changed the face of Latin America.
- Islamic thought has a significant impact on politics not only in the Middle East but also within other countries.
- Catholic social thought inspired some Eastern European reforms like the Solidarity movement in Poland.
- Everyone agrees that the revival of the American religious Right as a political movement impacts the choices we have when we go to the polls to elect a president.
- The Christian Coalition tells us that all freshman Republicans elected in 1994 identified themselves as conservative Christians.

The “public square,” a phrase coined by Richard Neuhaus, is teeming with groups that identify themselves as religious. But at the same time public discord—political disagreement about public policy in this country—is at an all-time high. You can’t do policy analysis without dealing with phrases like “culture wars” or “class wars.” And the irony is that discord among Christians reflects the discord we see in other groups in society.

Which one of these groups is correct? How should Christians figure out the relationship between faith and politics? We know that abortion rights, welfare reform, health-care reform, and tax policy divide the nation’s citizens—but they also divide Christians. Is there any hope that as a body, Christians can or will ever be able to speak with one voice on political issues?

I don’t actually have an answer for you. I’ve been working in this area of faith and policy for many years and there are times when I am excited and feel blessed to be in the midst of an ecumenical group of Christians—both liberal and conservative—working on welfare reform. There are other times when I throw my hands up in despair when I hear one group of Christians speak so judgmentally about the political perspective of another group. I am convinced, however, that the first thing Christians must do is to set aside the labels *liberal* and *conservative* and step back from the American political arena to examine some of our fundamental assumptions.

Biblical Reflection

I've taught introductory politics classes in Christian institutions and in public institutions. My faith provides me with certain truths that are foundational to my understanding of government in both settings.

- God is Lord of all creation, including the state, whether or not we choose to recognize this.
- The state's job is to do justice to all people and institutions of all faith traditions. Jesus never used the power of the state to convert people, and Christians today should follow the example of the farmer in Matthew 13:24–30. When the farmer's helpers saw the wheat and the weeds coming up, together they asked if they should separate the wheat from the weeds. The farmer said no. So the sun shone on both the wheat and the weeds. The rain fell on both the wheat and the weeds. The wheat and the weeds were not to be separated until the harvest. This means to me that when Christians talk about the task of government, they must ask what it means to have the public, civic equivalent of the crop's sun and rain providing equally for all people.

Christian politics asks the question, what does God's authority mean for the state or for government? There are at least four Christian traditions that provide an answer to this question.

One tradition integrates the state with the church, believing that the role of the state is to use politics as a tool to try to bring about God's requirements for God's people in a nation—even if that nation is made up of believers and nonbelievers.



In this tradition, guidance for the state can be found in the Old Testament, where God gives direction to Israel. The church and the state are one and the same—a theocracy. This perspective is rooted in the belief that all authority belongs to God. However, it does not ask the question, what is justice for the nonbeliever?

The second tradition argues not only that the church and state are separate institutions but that the church should have little to do with the state.



This tradition believes that Christians are to be separate from the world. The government is needed as a result of sin and therefore little good can come of it. This tradition takes seriously the biblical command to be distinct from the world; however, it does not take into account the biblical statements that all authority in heaven and on earth is God's authority.

A third tradition is little more than American interest-group politics.



In this tradition, Christians act just as any other interest group does; they try to get government to give them things, much as the AARP or the National Rifle Association argue for government to pass laws that benefit them. Sadly, this seems to be the model that most American Christians use. I find little biblical support for this model.

A fourth tradition suggests that the role of the government is not to bring about God's kingdom by force, but rather to open up the civic public order for all citizens so that they have the freedom and ability to fulfill the role that God has called them to fulfill. God is the one who will sit in judgment, at a later date, to determine who has and who has not responded to God appropriately.



Is there a distinctively Christian view of the state?

Read the parable of the wheat and the weeds—this parable is the one most often referred to as a political parable (see Matthew 13:24–30). When Jesus explained what he meant by this parable he said that the wheat and the weeds were to grow up together. Both would benefit from the rain and the sun that he sent to nourish the wheat. No one would rip out the weeds (punish the sins of the unbeliever) until the crop was harvested.

This perspective emphasizes that there is a difference between the job of the church and the job of government but that both belong to God. The biblical role of government is to provide justice for everyone, but particularly for the poor, the weak, and the sick, whom God protects throughout Scripture. The biblical role of the church is to worship, among other things. The government should not take on the role of the church.



To learn more about this perspective, read *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square*, by James Skillen, director of the Center for Public Justice. It's a very interesting understanding of what God calls us to do in the world.

Preparation

Those gathered will

- discuss the issue of “party wars.”
- continue discussing our political responsibility.



Key Question

- Should Christians be Republicans or Democrats?

Resources Needed

- Bibles
- Paper (or notebooks)
- Pens or pencils
- Computer with Internet access

Gathering

We can't really act politically unless we know something about the world in which we live. To what extent is our experience as citizens of the United States common around the world? Take this little quiz (answers are found on page 13). Have one person ask the question. Then the group should discuss their answers and see if they can come to a consensus. Then the leader should give the correct answer.



Do these facts cause you to ask any new questions as you think about our role as citizens in the world?

Quiz

If the world were a village of 100 people:

- How many Asians would there be?
- How many Europeans?
- How many from the Americas?
- How many Africans?
- How many females?
- How many whites vs. nonwhites?
- How many people would own 32 percent of the wealth of the village? What country would they be citizens of?
- How many would live in substandard housing?
- How many would suffer from malnutrition?

- How many would have gone to college?
- How many would be unable to read?
- How many would have a computer?¹



Consider these questions:

What have Democrats traditionally stood for? What about Republicans?

Do you see compatibility of either or both with biblical teachings?

Which of the four models resonates most with you?

Use the Internet to find the e-mail addresses of your representatives in both the state government and in Congress. With your group select a “justice” issue that you want to learn more about. Read about this issue and then find time in the coming weeks to write a letter to your representatives, telling them what is important to you.

Living the Word

During the week go on the Internet and explore the sites for Catholic Charities, The Center for Public Justice, and Evangelicals for Social Action. Do any of these groups raise questions that resonate with the way that you are beginning to think about your own role as a citizen?

www.cpjustice.org The Center for Public Justice

www.esa-online.org Evangelicals for Social Action

www.nccbuscc.org United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Closing

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Leader: We thank you, Lord, for the gift of family, friends, work, shelter, and food.

Group: Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Leader: We praise you, Lord, for the gifts and responsibility of government and citizenship.

1. From “If the World Were a Village of 100 People,” www.familycare.org.