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Chapter 3: Thinking About God and Government

Mark Caleb Smith

I am a Christian. I am also a political scientist. Putting those two facts together causes many people to break for the intellectual “EXIT” signs that surround any discussion. The specter of combining religious faith, which is in some ways so personal, with government, which touches us all, feels ominous and foreboding. But, for the orthodox Christian, who is convinced that we are to hold “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5)¹, we have a responsibility to understand the contours of the relationship between God and government.

In some ways, the Bible has remarkably little to say about government. There are no books of 1 and 2 Politics, and there is no Paul’s Epistle to the Legislators.² There is very little focused discussion of political issues and no discursives on the appropriate forms of government. There is no blueprint for political effectiveness and no blanket endorsement of an appropriate, Christian ideology. This can be frustrating, especially when we approach specific policy questions. What is the optimum rate of taxation? How much government regulation of the environment is appropriate? How long should prison sentences be? The Bible may provide principles that will help us think through these matters, such as the Christian attitude toward taxation, stewardship, and justice, but it rarely yields concrete answers to pointed policy questions.

In other ways, the Bible is full of government. Obviously, the Old Testament focuses on the nation of Israel, which was ruled by an array of good judges, bad kings, and ugly violence. Many of the world’s great empires rise and fall across the pages of Scripture. The Egyptians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks, and Romans all figure prominently in the Bible’s narrative. Christ’s ministry took place against the backdrop of Roman occupation. The Apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, and he used that status to serve his purposes on occasion. Perhaps most interestingly, the Bible portrays some children of God as they lived in hostile societies.

¹ All biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, come from the English Standard Version (2001), published by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

² Granted, there are 1 and 2 Kings, but these are historical books that recount Israel’s struggles (akin to 1 and 2 Chronicles). There are many political lessons in these books, but they are not necessarily normative. Instead, they are descriptive. Drawing firm political inferences from them is difficult, especially when we move beyond the fact that Israel had a unique history with God enjoyed by no subsequent nation.

Joseph and Daniel were not only strangers in strange lands, but they rose to positions of power and influence in public affairs.

Thankfully, there are some specific biblical passages that focus on the idea of government. Romans 13:1–7 most clearly reveals a set of biblical principles that demand attention.

¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

This is a rich text full of critical teaching. We have some discussion of how we ought to relate to government — we are to honor, respect, and obey it. We also see a description of what government is called to do — reward good behavior and punish bad behavior. Government officials are referred to as “ministers of God.” This is fascinating, especially when we consider Paul’s audience. Roman Christians were not normally blessed with the kinds of political leaders we would naturally associate with the divine. All of these things matter and are worth exploration, but I wish to focus on how this passage helps us understand three questions. Where does government come from? What is government’s purpose? What is the Christian response toward government?

Where Does Government Come From?

Life is, in some ways, a process of asking and answering questions. Toddlers are consumed with understanding reality, which compels them to ask questions like, “Why is the sky blue?” As we answer these questions, we are educating. The answers start simply for the sake of understanding. “The light from the sun creates that color.” As children grow, the answers get more complicated. “Because solar light scatters blue

molecules in the atmosphere.” Eventually, the questions become more fundamental even though they may begin in the same place. So, “Why is the sky blue?” grows into “Why is physical reality the way it is?” If we truly narrow things, all of life’s questions are the same: “Why?” Answers must begin or end in one of two places. “God” or “not God.” Tomes have been, and forevermore will be, written about these answers. Cultures coalesce and fracture around these answers, which, like it or not, shape society; either reality, for most, is grounded in the sacred or it is not. Embracing the initial path leads to many other forks, but this is one we cannot avoid. The origin of government begins in the same place.

Political philosophers are famous for a thought experiment referred to as “a state of nature,” or a setting in which humans are free from either society or government. The conditions established within this “state” are frequently used to justify the need for government (as with John Locke³), or as an ideal setting before humans were tainted by government and society (as with Jean-Jacques Rousseau⁴), or as a starting place for particular conceptions of justice (John Rawls⁵). Regardless of the motivation or outcome, the state of nature is deliberately devoid of God. If we take Genesis 1–3 seriously, no matter how we interpret some elements, there is no “state of nature” divorced from God and His supernatural intervention in His creation. God was not only the active part of the creative process, He was a presence among His creatures. Eden was not separated from divine reality, but the divine defined the reality, including the potential need for government, even in that setting. One might argue that the Fall resulted in a “state of nature,” and that this state is more reflective of this philosophical construction, but the Fall was a consequence of God’s curse, so sin, not some sort of benign humanity, would be the defining characteristic of this condition. Such an environment would share little in common with most states of nature, except for maybe that of Thomas Hobbes⁶, who saw life without government as a destructive war between mutually fearful and self-interested individuals. However, even for Hobbes, government resulted primarily from the human need for government for self-protection as opposed to being rooted in a divine decree.

³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, edited by C. B. Macpherson. Hackett Publishing Co., 1980.

⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. Hackett Publishing Co., 1992.

⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition. Belknap Press, 1999.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Hackett Publishing Co, 1994.

While Genesis portrays God as active within His creation, Romans 13 is even clearer as it addresses God and government together. Taking the passage at face value leaves us with only one answer to the following question: Where does government come from? The answer is “God,” for there is “no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” This is, more than anything, the Bible’s fundamental insight about government. While many Christians may know this on one level, that knowledge too often fails to permeate our political thoughts and actions. The divine origin of government should recondition the manner in which we see government. Government proceeds not from our own tainted hands, the clutches of the Devil, or from words printed on a brittle parchment locked in the National Archives, but from an omniscient and omnipotent God. The first lesson, then, is that government is not about us and it does not flow from us, but it is about God.

In Romans 13:1, Paul uses the word “instituted.” What is an institution, at least according to Scripture? God institutes three things — the family, the church, and government. What do these have in common? They are social (as opposed to individual) organizations that allow humans to achieve things collectively they cannot adequately achieve on their own. The family provides a stable environment for producing, raising, and shaping children. The church accomplishes God’s mission by spreading His word and providing a community for Christians. What about government? What does it do? Paul gives at least a partial answer in Romans 13. Government exists to instill justice and restrain evil through the use of the “sword,” or “coercive” power. There is much more to say on this front, but that comes in the next section.

The presence of evil, though, raises an interesting issue for the nature of government and God’s institution of it. Did God create government only as a response to sin? In other words, is it more accurate to say government, though from God, can be traced to the fall of humans in Genesis 3? Is government only a consequence of sin? Though it might be tempting to say it is, this view is too limited.

God created Adam and Eve in His own image (Gen. 1:26). What, precisely, does this mean? We can debate the nature of the *Imago Dei* and still not come to an agreement. However, we do know there are particular divine elements imprinted on us as created beings. One of those is our social nature. In that same passage referenced above, we read “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness’ (emphasis added).

We know from throughout Scripture that God exists as three persons in one being — the Father; the Son, Jesus; and the Holy Spirit. The picture we have of this Trinity is one of eternal, communal relationship. Within the Trinity there are defined roles and distinctive responsibilities. In Galatians 4:4, Paul says that God “sent forth” Christ. In John 3:17 there is similar language. In John 14:26, Christ acknowledges that God will send the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2, we see God pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. So, part of these distinctive roles involves not only a relationship, but also something of an ordered hierarchy. Even within this perfect social interaction, there are decisions made and roles fulfilled.

Genesis 2, which is a more detailed account of Adam and Eve’s creation, displays part of God’s rationale for why He made both male and female. God says to Adam, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” From our creation, as humans we need others. We must, as created beings, function with others; this is our natural condition, even apart from sin. There is no implication that Adam’s state of loneliness was a moral failing, but part of his created essence. We are not meant to be alone. This reality is the beginning of society, or the existence of human community.

Genesis 1 also reveals a natural, human responsibility. In verse 26, God gave His creatures a duty to exercise dominion over the rest of His creation. In Genesis 1:28, God told Adam to subdue the earth as part of this dominion. God requires this work, which would demand a sort of decision-making. To exercise dominion would require careful planning, some allocation of resources (especially of time), and a labor arrangement (who does what and when). For this to happen with more than one person would necessitate a decision-making process.

All of these ideas together — the social nature of the Trinity, human creation in God’s image, our need to be with others, and the task God gave us — at least plausibly suggest the seeds of government were sewn before the Fall. There is the possibility that government is not simply a response to sin, but it is part of who we are as divine image-bearers.⁷

There are other reasons for us to view government positively, regardless of how we think about the timing of its origin. Again, in Romans 13

⁷ There are other arguments that could be made regarding government as a condition outside of sin, but they don’t fit neatly into this discussion. Those would include the fact that divine government is still utilized and needed after Christ’s return. The New Heaven and the New Earth will still have a sovereign. Christ will reign, more than implying a kind of governmental arrangement. Also, the angels themselves appear to have a hierarchy or structure, with the archangel having a place of superiority.

Paul spells out three critical facts that seem to denote God's favorable view of government. First, as we referenced, God instituted government. Second, God endows government with a particular set of responsibilities — the pursuit of justice through the use of the sword. This is one of the connections between temporal and divine justice. Third, Paul also labels those who govern as the “servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.” Not only does God provide government with a task, government serves as God's agent as it carries out this task and it serves Him as it does so.

This may seem to be overkill, but why is it critical for us to establish that government is part of God's plan for human beings? There are two reasons. First, to help distinguish what we consider a biblical view from popular, cultural understandings of government, which ignore its divine source. Second, there are some competing Christian conceptions that are also flawed. There are Christians convinced that government, far from being a divine tool, is Satan's domain, a rival for our allegiance, perhaps even the very “whore of Babylon” that weaves her way through John's Revelation.

This conception dominates among Christians who are pacifists of one sort or another.⁸ The essential argument is that Christ, through His death on the cross, showed us that subordination is the fundamental Christian approach to conflict. Christ's ethic of love and sacrifice stands in sharp contrast to government force, which is “anti-Christ.” Far from being an agent of God's grace, government is more accurately part of Satan's web of influence. As seen in Luke 4:5–6, Satan has control over the kingdoms of the world, and he revels in creating dehumanizing wars. As believers, when confronted by ungodly force we are obligated to respond with peace so that we might highlight the present injustice. Through this kind of confrontation, we show Christ's love to the world in the most powerful way possible. Depending on the source of the argument, Christians are unable to participate in the use of force in any way, which means serving in government may not be an option. Though pacifists often admit that God institutes government, it exists as a lesser of evils, so government combats wickedness with its own brand of evil that, while technically necessary, is still opposed to God and His will. God's relationship to government, then, is most accurately described as allowing evil to achieve His purposes. Government's immorality, for many, makes the distinction

⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*. Zondervan, 2006. Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President*. Zondervan, 2008.

between good and bad government somewhat meaninglessly, for all governments are worthy of rebellion in the pacifistic sense of the term.⁹

This view is, I think, difficult to square with the biblical evidence. While there is no doubt that government is influenced by sin, just as everything else is, and that government is uniquely capable of destruction and evil, there is almost no direct teaching in Scripture that government, as an entity, should be seen this way. Reducing all government to such a condition also presumes a disturbing amount of moral equivalence that makes it impossible to characterize governments as “good” or “bad.” While no government this side of heaven is perfect, some are morally and ethically better than others and to lump them all into an equivalent stew of evil seems ethically naked and theologically stunted.

Regardless of where one comes down on these matters — whether government is a consequence of sin or part of who we are as image-bearers — the basic answer to our question is still the same. We have government because God instituted it for His purposes. This matters, not just for academic purposes, but as a contrast with the world that surrounds us. Whether you are orthodox or a heretic; a premodern, modern, or a postmodern; a Libertarian or a Green; a Democrat or a Republican, the divide between “God” and “not God” still persists. Our culture, in its effort to minimize God, has answered the question of where government comes from with “not God.” I disagree.

What Is Government’s Purpose?

There are at least three possible answers to this question, two of which were previously referenced. First, government performs an ordering and collective decision-making function that is necessary within human community. As described above, this task may transcend the existence of sin.

Second, Paul describes government’s most obvious responsibility in Romans 13:2–4 — to reward good behavior and punish evil behavior. Government punishes with what Paul refers to as the power of the “sword.” This is government in its most basic sense. The pursuit of justice might demand many things, but legally it requires government to provide people what they deserve in the here and now — either reward or punishment — based on their behavior. Government functions to restrain evil in our world. Even if the seeds of government were indeed sewn before the Fall, after the Fall, government’s task includes this necessary restraint.

⁹ Yoder, 200 (f.n. 8).

There is little disagreement on this point, at least outside of some pockets of anarchists, who want no government restraint. If you are either religious or secular, government has a positive role to play in society. Disagreement emerges, to a point, about the source of this bad behavior that must be curbed by government.

The Lord of the Flies, by William Golding, is a penetrating novel. The story is simple, but the message it carries is profound. A sizeable group of young boys gets stranded on a deserted island. The schoolboys are used to uniforms, getting into line, doing lessons, and obeying teachers. They are used to lives of structure and constancy and authority. They are stranded, though, without adults. And while it takes time, Golding portrays a slow but steady degeneration as the boys eventually form gangs and hostilities erupt. At one point, our protagonist, Ralph, witnesses something he would have found previously unimaginable, an act of violence against his good, decent, and largely helpless little friend called "Piggy." Golding writes that at that moment, "Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of a true, wise friend called Piggy." More than anything, *The Lord of the Flies* is a testament to human corruption. It suggests that civilization is a veneer that once peeled away is revealed only to hide a twisted species capable of brutality and hatred.

Christians typically ascribe this kind of evil to sin, a word that has fallen out of favor during the last century. While not unlike the "state of nature" discussed above, the novel succeeds when it shows civilization and society apart from governmental order. And though I argue there has never been such a thing as a state of nature, it is not hard to imagine that life apart from that government would be, for most of us, intolerable.

When we think of how our government acts, or often refuses to act, or how it wastes money, or how there are elements of corruption, or how it seems our leaders just cannot come together to solve problems, we feel frustrated, and rightfully so. But, to be Christian about government, we must grasp two important things.

First, even the government we have, as frustrating as it might be, is far better and more preferable to life without that government. Though it might sound crass, and I cannot speak from personal experience, I think I would rather have a bad government as compared to no government. Without government, I fear we would look not all that differently than

Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, just on a different scale. We would collapse into a system where pure power defines reality, where our families and possessions are at the mercy of the biggest kid on the block. We would, without government, organize our lives around simple survival. Even with a poor government in place, there must be order for that government to survive; there must be some structure, some system of punishing wrongs (even if they are terribly defined), and some ability to protect people from simple, naked aggression.

In this way, I see government as an element of God's grace in our lives. We have government so that we might enjoy our lives, even if they are hard. We should, at the minimum, thank God for government because it provides enough order to exist. And, if we are blessed to live in a stable society that has a better-defined view of justice, where we can live in peace and watch our children grow up, where we can provide for ourselves without constant fear of oppression, we have even more for which to be thankful.

Second, we should always be aware that government itself, since it is made up of human beings who are equally capable of that twistedness, can also be a scourge. Government, in some ways, has a unique ability to be violent and destructive because governments hold the majority of power in our societies. If one of government's responsibilities is to use force to restrain evil, we must consider that this force to counteract evil can, in itself, be turned into evil.

The 20th century was the American century. It was the century that ended with the U.S. as the only superpower. It was a century in which we sent a man to the moon and led the greatest technological revolution in human history. For America, the 20th century was a great age. Remember, though, it was also marked by terrible wars. World War I and World War II claimed millions of lives. Those wars were initiated by governments, fought by governments, and, eventually, ended by governments. Our military cemeteries are full of people who died because governments failed to settle disputes. Not only did governments fight one another in long, bloody conflicts, governments also destroyed millions of their own people. Nazi Germany's death camps were set up to rid its own population of undesirables — Jews, the handicapped, and homosexuals, for example. Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, starved millions of his own people in Ukraine because the agricultural system there undermined Communist ideals and the wealthier people posed a political

threat to Stalin's control. Estimates vary, but somewhere around 10 million people died as Stalin exported food from the region to fuel his own ambitions.

It is hard for us to come to grips with this kind of wickedness, but we must realize that wickedness on this scale was made possible by government's organization, utilization of resources, and control over society. When we ponder government, then, we must remember that while it can be a gift from God, like all of His gifts, sinful humans can also pervert it. Without both of these realities in mind, we have an incomplete view of government.

The power of the sword cuts both ways, it seems. Government appropriately wields the sword when it punishes the law-breaker. It abuses the sword when it perverts the notion of rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. Scripturally, we see this phenomenon, of government gone bad, in a variety of places, but the Old Testament places the issue squarely before us. Even in Israel, God's chosen people, the powerful would frequently distort the legal system to deny justice to their opponents or enemies. 1 Kings 21 tells us the story of Ahab, Jezebel, Naboth, and a vineyard. Ahab, the king, wanted the vineyard, which was located next to the palace, for his own use. Naboth refused to barter for or sell the land because it had been in his family for some time. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, upon discovering the situation, used the king's power to frame Naboth for blasphemy, primarily by bringing two false witnesses against him. Why two witnesses? At least two were required to convict and execute Naboth, who was stoned to death outside the city. This is a simple example of those in power misusing the machinery of government to reward evil and punish good.

This distortion of justice must have been a common occurrence in ancient Israel, for the prophets were consumed by the notion. In Amos 5, both God and His prophet heap scorn on God's children for their treatment of the poor and the righteous. The wicked take bribes, trample on the poor, and they fail to establish justice. God's solution? We find it in verse 24. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Not only is the establishment of justice part of government's responsibility according to God's plan, justice guarantees that people are treated fairly before the law, in spite of their wealth, background, gender, or skin color.

There is one final purpose for government, and though we will only touch on it briefly, it may be the most critical, at least in the cosmic sense. God instituted government, but He did so as part of His creation. Government has a role to play in God's plan for the world. God does not do things by accident. He does not make mistakes, nor does He make things up as He goes along. God, the Bible tells us, sees all of reality — past, present, and future. Time is even part of His creation.

I think, if we look at the Bible, government is one tool God uses to achieve His divine will. Let's take a look at the book of Daniel to see this spelled out clearly. In Daniel 1, we see that God used the Babylonians to bring justice to His own people. We see throughout the book that God even worked among the Babylonians through His servant Daniel, who gave faithful counsel and witness to King Nebuchadnezzar. We see similar things in Egypt, where God used Pharaoh, and even the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, to both enslave and free Israel. These are all critical parts of God's divine plan and these parts involve God's use of government for His own purposes.

In fact, I think this is part of what Paul is referencing back in Romans 13. When God institutes government, He does so for His own purposes. Our governments, as instituted by God, have a role to play in the drama of history. Those governments can glorify God and earn His blessing, or they can dishonor God and earn His punishment. Just as government dispenses God's justice in the here and now, God dispenses justice, both in the here and now and in eternity. However, I do not think we can always determine when a government is behaving well or poorly. Nor do I think we can easily draw a line between government activity A and outcome B and call it "God's Judgment." This way of thinking is too simple and presupposes we have God's view of all events or that we understand His reasons. We are, after all, meager creatures when compared to the one who created us.

What Is the Christian Response Toward Government?

Romans 13:1–7 spells out some of our obligations to government. Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to "be subject to," "respect," and "honor" those in authority as we "do what is good" and "pay taxes." Paul sets a high standard for how we must approach those in power. For the sake of simplicity, let's boil these notions down to two ideas: obedience and honor.

Obedience to government is not a uniquely Pauline concept. Similar themes are echoed in 1 Peter 2:13–17, and in Christ's admonition to render unto both God and Caesar (Matt. 22:15–22). Christians are commanded to obey not merely to escape punishment, but, as Paul notes, "for the sake of conscience." Put simply, we obey because it is the right thing to do, regardless of other factors. This is the difference between going the speed limit only when a police officer's cruiser is stationed alongside the road, and in adhering to the law on an empty and desolate highway. Conscience is a sterner master than fear of retribution, and acquiescence to conscience's demands reveals a transformed heart and a will that is pliable to God's dictates.

Scripture also makes it clear that our obedience to government is not absolute. Daniel went to the lions' den (Dan. 6) and his compatriots, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were tossed into a fiery furnace (Dan. 3) for their disobedience to government. They are praised for doing so. The disciples spent time in jail, also for refusing government's commands (Acts 5). Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill baby boys as they were born, but the women, who feared God, refused. All of these events, however, share something in common. In every instance, the people of God are being told to break God's law by governments. Daniel prayed. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not bow down to a graven image. The disciples preached the Gospel. The Hebrew midwives did not kill the innocent. When conflicts arise between God's commandments and government's laws, our choice, as believers, is a clear one. God's law supersedes that of human institutions, so we cannot sin in order to obey the government. This is true for sins of omission, when we fail to do what is required (pray or preach the Gospel), and for sins of commission, when we do what is forbidden (worshipping an idol or murder). While this still begs many questions (How do we respond to evil governments when they are not forcing us to break the law? Is there a right of rebellion or revolution? Is self-defense against government permissible and, if so, when?), the principle is clear. We must obey government at least until it forces us to sin. At that point, to obey government would be sinful.

Readers should also take notice that the biblical standard includes an acceptance of punishments by government once they are handed down, even if those punishments are for actions taken to obey God's law. Daniel, his trio of fellow Jews, and the disciples all were caught and punished by that government. While God miraculously intervened to protect in the first two cases, he did not in the third. The disciples were beaten for

their deeds. By obeying God, and by willingly accepting government's punishments, we respect government's authority while also clinging to God's commandments. This is how we render to God and Caesar, even when God and Caesar conflict.

Lastly, we have an obligation to honor those in authority. Perhaps more than any other admonition, this strikes at the heart of the American partisan. Resistance and rebellion shape our character. We pride ourselves on an unwillingness to kneel in respect to those God has empowered. This command cuts across our culture, which is more receptive to mockery and ridicule than respect. Surely many of our political leaders deserve a dose of mockery, but our default response to leaders, as believers, must be to honor and respect them instead. In 1 Timothy 2:1–2, Paul tells us to offer “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings” for “kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Honor is about more than simply paying lip service, it is also about humbly praying for the blessing, and interceding on behalf, of our leaders.

This notion, in some ways, is most challenging in a democratic context. We can influence our government in a way that was foreign to Paul and Peter. We advocate and persuade in the public square, and sometimes while doing so we must draw distinctions between ourselves and other parties, policies, and politicians, even those who are in authority over us. The rub, of course, is how do we accomplish this while maintaining respect and honor for our opponents? Our tendency, in the hurly-burly of politics, is to attack, even to the point of treating rival parties and figures as enemies more deserving of scorn and condemnation than honor. Remember, even if we conceive of political opponents as enemies, we are told, in Proverbs 25:21, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” In Matthew 5:44, Christ tells us to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The painful reality, for too many of us, is that we treat those who disagree with us politically — be they presidents or pundits — worse than we are commanded to treat our enemies in Scripture. Far from honoring or respecting our leaders, we seek to tear them down and destroy them.

Perhaps this raises the most difficult question for the politically minded evangelical in 21st-century America. Is it possible to be politically effective and to still hold tightly to this command? If there is tension between political success and fidelity to Scripture, the human temptation is to

succumb to success, while the call of the Divine is to do what is right and to leave the results in the hands of the One who made us and sustains us.

Conclusion: Christian Citizenship in a Republic

To some degree, Paul's admonition in Romans 12 and 13, Peter's teaching in 1 Peter 2, and Christ's declaration to render to God and Caesar in Matthew 22, all point toward a common idea. There is an expectation that Christians should display at least a modicum of earthly citizenship as they relate to the regimes in which they find themselves. Within the Roman world of the first and second centuries, good citizenship largely consisted of obeying, respecting, and honoring the government. Only a select few would have the opportunity to influence government policy in a meaningful way, so these admonitions, to be citizens of sound repute, would be the sum total of political obligations for nearly all Christians in that world. But these teachings were rooted in a political environment with minimal popular political influence; this creates one of the most enduring theological puzzles of the past millennium. How are we, as believers, to apply these ideas when we live in political communities that are far different from those of Christ, Paul, and Peter?

As Americans, we are blessed with a government that allows for many paths of input and influence. We might vote. We can donate time, money, and effort. We could run for office, start interest groups, lobby, blog, or advocate. In short, we can care. Granted, some of us do none of those things, but our system allows for all of these and more. And, perhaps most critically, our system is built upon the idea that we, the people, are to hold our government accountable and responsible for its actions. This is, at base, how a republic is designed to function. We are the fountain of political power. Our elected officials exercise that power, but only as we allow them to do so. In order for our government to work, in any meaningful sense of that word, we must do these things or our government is no longer what it claims to be. For us, these are the traits of good citizenship.

If it is true that the spirit behind the New Testament's teaching on government is that we, as believers, are to be good citizens, we have to acknowledge that spirit, but the spirit of the text does not obviate our responsibilities to its clear teaching (to honor, obey, and respect), for that teaching still binds us. We are called to be faithful to both the letter and spirit of God's commands. In this sense, we may have an obligation to be good citizens, so long as our political environment defines citizenship in

terms that are not at odds with our other Christian obligations. If being a good citizen requires me to worship the state, for example, I cannot do that. If being a good citizen prevents me from loving my neighbor as myself, I cannot do that. But if being a citizen places other expectations upon me, ones that I can square with God's call on my life, I should endeavor to be a good citizen.

There is, however, one additional factor at work. Recall, from above, how God gives government concrete responsibilities. The Bible seems to indicate that when governments fail those obligations, God holds them accountable in some fashion. In our form of government, a republic that operates on popular consent, we, the people, are the supreme human authority. We elect those who make choices and then we hold them responsible, ideally, for those choices. We are the ultimate corrective when government misbehaves, and we are the ultimate engine of change when change is necessary. Though we do not wield the sword of justice, we help dictate which hands wield the sword. We are responsible for holding government responsible. What does this mean? It means that we bear a double burden in a republic. We are burdened, by Scripture, to treat government as we are commanded to treat it, but we are also burdened to steer government toward just outcomes. We are citizens, to be sure, but our citizenship requires more than deference. It requires leadership, accountability, and influence. In some ways, we, the people, are both the governed and the government.

This is why, I believe, that we, as Christians, should not simply sit aside and allow our government to do as it wishes. There is evil in the world. That evil lurks in all places for it inhabits the human heart. Government is one method by which that evil is checked and limited. However, our government, which relies on popular consent, has many co-pilots. If we, as Christians, refuse to play a role in that process, we are refusing an opportunity to steer our government toward better destinations. We should at least try. While we may fail, for there is no guarantee that our actions will matter, there will be glory in our efforts. We can rest with an easy conscience. If we do not act, and we watch American drift toward that evil, we will, at least in some way, be responsible.

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