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Why Bother with Politics?

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Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. ... Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. ... Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Romans 13:1-7
The Apostle Paul in Romans 13 provides clear teaching for how we, as citizens, should interact with our government. While libraries could be filled with the implications of these seven verses, three important principles force us to wrestle with the question, “Why bother with politics?”

**Honor**
The least-discussed aspect of Romans 13 is the onus it puts on believers to honor and respect those God has placed in authority. Contemporary evangelicals struggle with this edict, and our willingness to belittle, demean, and provoke our leaders brings shame upon us and reveals our collective hypocrisy as we seek to bend our culture toward Christ-likeness. Even if we perceive our leaders to be our enemies, and surely many of the Roman Christians Paul is directly writing to would have done so, Paul reminds his readers just a few verses earlier that we should not repay evil with evil and that we should feed our enemies and give them drink, for this allows us to “overcome evil with good.” Sadly, in modern American evangelical politics, we often treat our leaders worse than we are commanded to treat our enemies.

**Submission**
Paul exhorts believers to submit to the authority put over them. Submission occurs both out of fear of reprisals for disobedience and also out of conscience. Martin Luther argues that this submission is a matter of the heart — a total submission not based on fear alone, but out of conviction that it is the proper thing to do. Our submission appears to be universal in Paul’s language, so our submission is not conditional upon the government or its quality.

Though we cannot pretend to have the ability to control policy in a pluralistic, fractured system like ours, we do have the opportunity, based on our freedoms and rights, to attempt to influence the system. This is the blessing and curse of being a Christian in a representative republic.

We know the apostles did not obey when commanded to cease preaching the Gospel (Acts 5), and neither did Daniel when prevented from praying (Daniel 6), nor Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they were commanded to kneel before an idol (Daniel 3). Also, the Hebrew midwives did not comply with the Egyptian authorities when they were commanded to kill newborn boys (Exodus 1). The biblical teaching, when taken as a whole then, is that we, as believers, are to submit as long as government is not commanding us to sin.

**Participation Due to Submission**
As American Christians living in a representative, constitutional republic, to whom do we submit? There is no Caesar in America, for the theory of our government places no one above the law. Do we submit to Congress? The president? The Supreme Court? Our governors, mayors, or dogcatchers? The answer, naturally, is “yes.” However, that answer is not exhaustive.

Ultimately, the Constitution functions as the “supreme law of the land,” and acts that run counter to it are repugnant, even when committed by the president.
Our submission carries a burden unfelt by Paul’s readers. The Roman Empire was a sprawling colossus under the command of a single man. The Roman Christians had little to no opportunity to influence the direction of this City of Man, so while they were required to submit, their collective and individual responsibility for the regime's actions was negligible or non-existent. Nero was unjust, unwilling to bear the sword as God's agent of wrath, and ungodly in his behavior, so his divine punishment was his own.

We have no such luxury in our form of government. While our responsibility surely varies based on a myriad of circumstances, our government acts in our name, for it is only with our blessing, either implicit or explicit, that it continues. Our government's good and the divine blessing that it brings, as well as its evil and the divine punishment that follows, are ours to revel in or bear. Though we cannot pretend to have the ability to control policy in a pluralistic, fractured system like ours, we do have the opportunity, based on our freedoms and rights, to attempt to influence the system. This is the blessing and curse of being a Christian in a representative republic.

While we could falter under this burden, it should motivate us to act. A refusal to participate in our messy, fallen, sometimes godless world of politics is a tacit approval of government's actions. Though examples are not numerous, Scripture does provide instances of believers who, when given the opportunity to intervene in political decision-making, did so to God’s glory. Esther, Joseph, and Daniel used their
influence to bend the regimes in which they found themselves toward more godly outcomes. Notice, however, that they did so under peril and threats of death and imprisonment. They used godly discernment, effective action, and proper humility as they pursued God’s will in the public (though in Esther’s case a slightly more private) square. If they had refused to act, whether on the basis of holiness, detachment, or fear, the sins before them would have been multiplied. Inaction, when action might bring more godly results, does not appear to be a valid option.

As Paul Henry argues, “To withdraw [from politics] is in essence to capitulate, if not to evil, at least to what one perceives to be a lesser vision of the good. Such withdrawal is an abdication of moral responsibility. How ironic, then, that those who do withdraw from politics often rationalize their actions by insisting that politics is a dirty business and they want to keep their hands clean!”

The great paradox of Romans 13 for Christians in a representative or democratic form of government is that with submission comes responsibility and with responsibility comes participation and with participation comes the opportunity to bring either glory or ignominy to God. This should bring hope, fear, and trembling.

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