

A Holistic View of Secular Politics



Perhaps you've thought before, "How could this person be a follower of Jesus like me, but he or she has such a radically different understanding of politics?"

As Christians, we pledge the same allegiance to the same God, yet we sometimes endorse different political parties, candidates, or ideologies. Why is that?

Sometimes we are tempted to come up with overly simplistic explanations for this. "We take the Bible more seriously than they do." Or, "We follow the footsteps of Jesus more than they do." In other words, we may think that the reason why people disagree politically is because one side is more theologically robust or spiritually faithful than the other side.

But it's much more complicated than that.

Our politics are shaped by a combination of things—our upbringing, our communities, our news outlets, etc. All of these play a large role in determining our political priorities and values. But there is another important factor that guides us—our theological systems.

A theological system, like Reformed theology or liberation theology, is an interpretive grid through which we understand the Bible. Our systems are inherited by the faith communities that walk with us during the early days of our Christian faith, and depending on our Christian journey, they may change or evolve as we are exposed to varying streams of thought within the Christian church.

When we have a very rigid theological system, we naturally emphasize certain portions of the Bible more than others. The verses we quote or the stories we highlight will be the ones that most support our specific theological systems. Other portions of the Bible are viewed as "difficult texts"—



they are hard to interpret because they don't neatly fit into our theological systems.

Much of the confusion within the church concerning politics has to do with the fact that Christians, whether consciously or subconsciously, subscribe to varying theological systems. Sometimes one theological system is more biblical than another theological system, but other times two seemingly contrasting systems both have strong biblical support. In such cases, two different people may be reading the Bible through different interpretive grids. It is as if they are wearing glasses of different colors.

This resource intends to show some of the ways in which Bible-believing Christians differ from one another in their theological systems and how that might lead them to view politics differently. We will be exploring three topics that have to do with faith and politics, and each topic will briefly discuss two different theological systems that can be placed on the ends of a spectrum. The two contrasting positions will be explained, and some of their biblical support will be provided. After each one of the topics, some reflection questions will be provided.



The goals are twofold. By understanding the well-intentioned reasons behind somebody's differing political values, (1) perhaps we will extend more grace to those of us on the other side, and (2) perhaps we will incorporate different ideas from different systems, such that our church will collectively have a more holistic view of secular politics.

Church and Culture: Separatism or Transformationalism?



Most Christians, whether they know it or not, fall somewhere on a spectrum between separatism and transformationalism. On the one hand, separatism instructs the church community to separate themselves and to remain distinct from the secular world. On the other hand, transformationalism invites the church community to follow Jesus' example of incarnation to immerse themselves within the secular world.

Separatism

Separatists believe that the church should focus on its internal identity, and, therefore, it should be unencumbered by the concerns of the world. After all, the apostle Paul teaches us, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever” (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)? And James argues in the same vein, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Old Testament Israel was commanded not to adopt foreign customs or intermarry with foreign women, and those patterns of distinction ought to remain for the church today.

In this view, most institutions in the secular world are too far from God and are not worth saving. Christians should certainly participate in them, but primarily as a witness for Christ in order to pull people out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. As for secular politics, we should not place much hope in it, since it is a complex web of corporate interests and partisan agendas—and much of it does not honor Christ.

Transformationalism

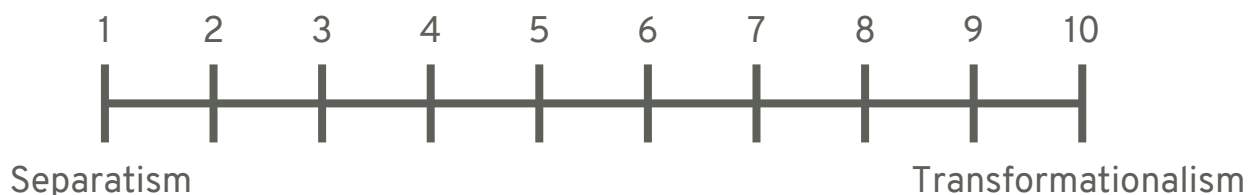
On the other hand, transformationalists believe that the calling of the church is not only to disciple people but also nations (cf. Matthew 28:19). The Christian gospel, they believe, has the power to not only transform individuals, but also their secular relationships, communities, institutions, and governments. They may point to the example of Israelites exiled to foreign cities in Jeremiah 29, who were instructed to build houses, plant gardens, and intermarry. Notably, they were also commanded, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”



Transformationalists also often point to the multitude of prophetic passages in the Old Testament in which secular nations were judged for pride, greed, or injustice (cf. Nahum 3:1; Zephaniah 3:1-2), as well as those that foretell a future kingdom of justice and righteousness (cf. Jeremiah 23:5). They encourage contemporary citizens to invest in the politics of their country, not just to fulfill one’s civic duty, but in the hopes that their respective nations would be transformed by the power of the gospel. All institutions, from public schools to tech companies to media networks, can be transformed for good if only Christians are faithful to their incarnational calling.

Reflection Questions

- On a scale from 1 to 10, where do you fall on the separatism and transformationalism spectrum, and why do you think that is?



- How might a Christian separatist look down upon a Christian transformationalist? And how might a Christian transformationalist look down upon a Christian separatist?
- Read Nehemiah 13:23-27, in which Nehemiah condemns the marrying of foreign women. Then read Jeremiah 29:4-6, in which God encourages the marrying of foreign women. How would you reconcile these two passages?

Secular Authority: Humble Submission or Open Disobedience?

Another spectrum where different Christians may fall has to do with one's posture toward secular government. On the one hand, some propose an attitude of humble submission to governing authorities, while others propose a mentality of open disobedience to governing authorities. Of course, one may naturally be more submissive under a good government and more disobedient under an evil government, but despite the circumstances, many Christians possess an inherent propensity toward either submission or disobedience.

Humble Submission

Those who propose humble submission point to the multitude of New Testament instructions that support their case (cf. Romans 13:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17). For example, Paul writes, "Let 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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:1-2).

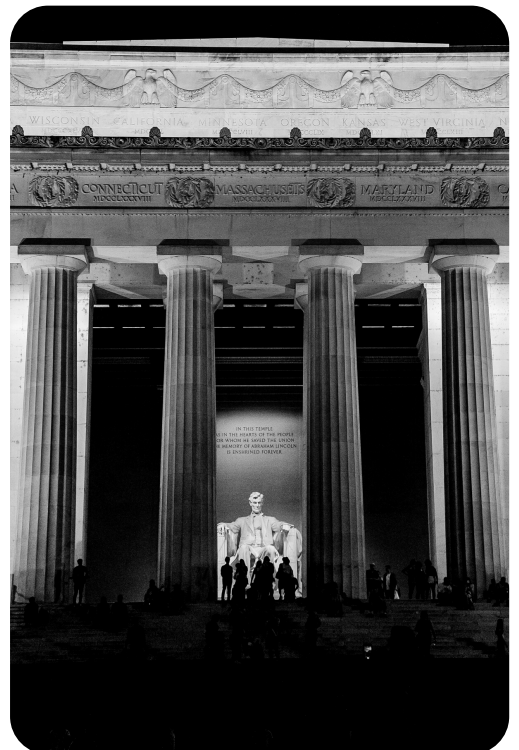
Notably, both Paul and Peter lived under a tyrannical Roman government, and both of them were put to death because of religious persecution. Surely if these heroes of our faith advocated submission and non-resistance, then it follows that all Christians living under less evil governments must do the same.

Perhaps we may suffer for doing good. But even this calling is a part of our witness to the gospel. As Peter writes, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). This principle is lived out through the character of Joseph, who went through the horrible experiences of betrayal, slavery, false accusation, and imprisonment, but his faithfulness eventually led him to a position of government leadership, through which he saved countless people from a famine.

Open Disobedience

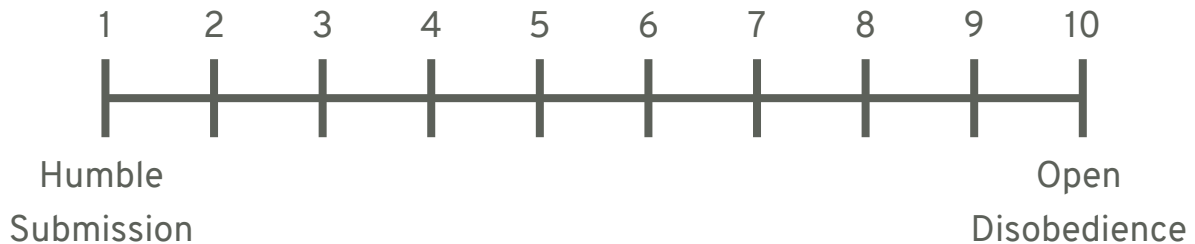
Those who advocate for open disobedience may point to the many examples of biblical characters who stood up to the evil in their government structures. Shiphrah and Puah refused Pharaoh’s command to kill the Hebrew male infants. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image. Esther broke protocol by entering the king’s court uninvited to save the Jews. Even Peter, when charged not to teach in Jesus’ name, responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” As citizens of a higher kingdom, we are called to assess the morality of our secular laws, and we choose to obey or disobey based on that assessment. The kingdom values of justice and righteousness need to apply not only in the church but also in the secular nations where kingdom citizens reside.



Reflection Questions

- On a scale from 1 to 10, where do you fall on the humble submission to open disobedience spectrum, and why do you think that is?



- The apostle Peter once said, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). But at another point, he wrote, “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13-14). Do you think Peter is being self-contradictory? If not, how do you reconcile these two passages?
- Do you believe a Christian has the moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws in secular government? Why or why not?



The Government: Necessary Evil or Righter of Wrongs?



Finally, some Christians view the secular government as a necessary evil, a system that is required to limit the excesses of sin, while others view it as a potential force for good and a righter of wrongs.

Necessary Evil

Those who view the secular government as a necessary evil might point to the countless examples of corrupt governments throughout Scripture. The first empire, Babel, was built in rebellion, and this pattern of defiance against God continued in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome. In Daniel and Revelation, secular empires are depicted as powerful beasts that engage in blasphemy and destruction.

Even Israel, God's chosen people, could not resist the same course of all other nations. When the people of Israel asked for a king of its own like all other nations, God said, “they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). Thus, Samuel was asked to warn Israel of the evil that would come about through kingship—exploitation and oppression (1 Samuel 8:10-18).

Because we live in a fallen world, having no government would result in total chaos. Therefore, we need some form of government. However, because it has the capacity for much evil, the best form of government, then, is a small government.

Righter of Wrongs

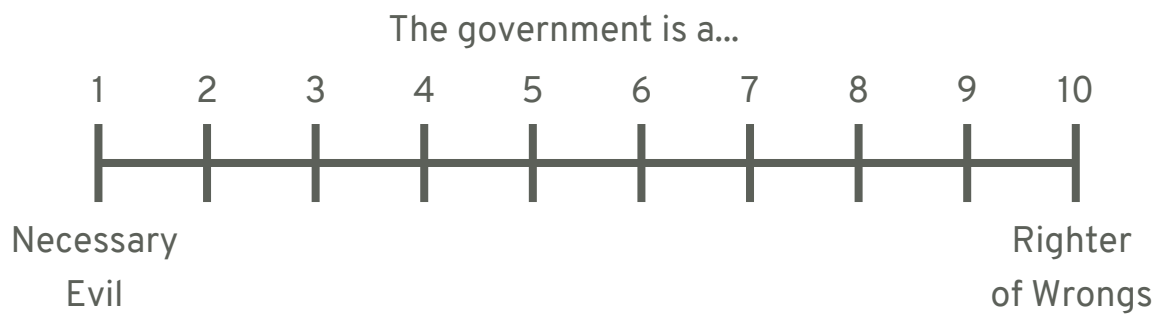
On the opposite end of the spectrum, some view the government in a more positive light—they have the potential to be a righter of wrongs. Paul writes that those in secular authority are avengers who carry out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4), and

he even describes them as “ministers of God” (Romans 13:6). Those who are in governance have been appointed by God to carry out his justice in the secular realm. All politicians, then, do not just represent their constituents but God himself.

It is, therefore, the government’s duty to protect the poor and the oppressed, ensure systems of justice, and harbor cultures of flourishing. Several men and women of God in the Scriptures occupied prominent positions within secular governments to execute God's will on a national level—Joseph, Esther, Nehemiah, and Daniel—proving that we should also seek to utilize governments to be forces of good.

Reflection Questions

- On a scale from 1 to 10, where do you fall on the necessary evil to righter of wrongs spectrum, and why do you think that is?



- Some people view their country like Israel, a representation of God’s kingdom on earth. Others view their country like Babylon, a symbol of human rebellion. How might these two views influence how someone views their government?
- God said to Solomon after Solomon finished building the temple, “[I]f my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). Do you believe that it is appropriate for Christians today to claim this promise and apply it to their respective nations? Why or why not?

Conclusion

The above spectrums are only an example of the many contrasting theological systems. In all of these spectrums, the appropriate response should not be, “Which side is most biblical?” The reality is that there is biblical evidence to support both sides. One can certainly make the case that the evidence on one side is stronger than the evidence on the other, but we must not say that those on the other side are unbiblical or unfaithful.

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt writes, “Morality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.”

The pattern of the secular world is division. The world finds its identity in tribes and factions and finds significance in making enemies out of those who disagree. But the way of Christ is not so. Jesus models grace, humility, and wisdom.

Every worldview has some good and some evil. Christians are not to blindly commit themselves to a secular cause and then seek out proof texts in the Bible to support their position. Rather, we are to start with the Bible, create a Christian ethic of politics, and then mine the different ideologies of the world for the truths that align.



We all have biases and blind spots. But the kingdom of God is diverse enough, if we are willing, to expose those areas and give us guidance. Therefore, let us continually evaluate our own positions and priorities and then seek to incorporate the elements of the Christian faith that are lacking. Let us, as disciples of Jesus, embody not only particular spiritual truths within the Christian faith but “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Let us live out a holistic view of secular politics.

Reflection Questions

- What theological systems most inform how you view secular politics?
- What is one thing you can do to be more aware or understanding of Christians that may see things differently than you do?
- Meditate on Ephesians 4:1-3: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Given the divisiveness within the church today, how can you live out Ephesians 4:1-3?

