

WEEK 8

A Biblical Philosophy for Engaging Government Five Principles

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin wrote a letter on behalf of Geneva's city council (1539). The city had Protestant leanings, but leaders had expelled Calvin two years prior. Cardinal Sadolet heard of Calvin's expulsion and wrote a warm letter asking the prodigal city to return to the faith. *And don't forget that eternal life is precious!* In other words, return to the Catholic Church or you'll be damned.

Geneva's city council asked Calvin to respond on their behalf, and the Reformer thundered to the Cardinal...

“*Your zeal for eternal life... keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God... Set before man, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God!*

— John Calvin

Cardinal Sadolet offered eternal life like a salesman offering fire insurance. *Get it now, or you'll regret it later!* Thus, the gospel wasn't centered upon God and His glory but man. The Cardinal's gospel left sinners "entirely devoted" to themselves.

Calvin believed that God's glory is the central issue of all things in life. As Christians, we are no longer to live for our own hopes and dreams—we belong to Christ. Thus, the question we should ask in all things is: How will this word or that deed exalt Jesus Christ?

QUESTION: Evangelicals have been zealous to live in an upright nation. Do you think that, in general, this zeal has been a biblical pursuit of God's glory or a man-centered pursuit? Please explain.

The intent of this final class is to provide five principles for biblically engaging the political arena. A “zeal to illustrate the glory of God” must have at least these five...

I. A Biblical Concept of Government.

We saw in week 1 that God ordained government to manage creation and to provide order by restraining evil (Gen 1-9). Conservative evangelicals tend to favor small government, but they have often expected government to do something quite large—shape society. Is this a biblical expectation? Is it even possible?

Evangelicals began the fight for Prohibition after the Civil War (1861-65), even forming the National Prohibition Party (1869). By the early 20th century, prohibition laws governed more than one-half of America. Moody’s *The Institute Tie* rejoiced and proclaimed in 1908 that “revival is in the air!”

However, soon after the 18th Amendment passed, the price of grapes increased tenfold as the demand for alcohol skyrocketed. Speakeasies and crime rings exploded, especially in Chicago under Governor Len Small. This wasn’t the national revival that evangelicals anticipated.

“*Politics is the place where the ideas that have already shaped society find their legislative applications.*

— Michael Horton

The Bible is the Word of the Living God. This Book is the basis for all morality, and government should strive to uphold it. Yet, governments are made and moved by men. They will not uphold a standard that society has come to reject. Governments are not able to fulfill their God-given design without the church making disciples.

QUESTION: The church and the state are two institutions established by God. Which institution could God use to transform a society? By what means?

We have often heard that if more evangelicals voted, we could “take back” America. The Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family successfully registered millions of evangelical voters. They accomplished much at the polls and had some political victories, but they had no effect upon society. Government was not designed to transform the world.

II. A Biblical Attitude Toward Political Leaders.

Evangelicals of the 1980s and 1990s saw few legislative victories, while the attitude of society on family issues became more liberal. Who was to blame for the lack of progress? Evangelicals blamed government.

At the 2005 conference, “Confronting the Judicial War on Faith,” Jerry Falwell and Tony Perkins condemned the federal judiciary. Perkins accused the judiciary of being a greater threat to America than terrorism, while Alan Keyes called it “the focus of evil.” James Dobson went so far as to compare the Supreme Court with the Ku Klux Klan.

“*As the apostle Paul urges us to obey and honor the “governing authorities” we must remember that he is not speaking of a political system consistent with “traditional values.” He was speaking of a bloodthirsty and pagan Caesar, a government directly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.*

— Russell Moore

Political rallies and certain conferences energize evangelicals, but do they help us better honor and submit to our authorities? Often, they do the opposite, even demonizing a potential mission field.

Both Paul and Peter taught that submission to authority is normative to the Christian life (Rom 13:1; 1 Pet 2:13). Submission does not mean believers shouldn’t engage their political leaders. We can disagree, even must disagree with our leaders at times.

A submissive heart, however, isn’t disrespectful and threatening. Rather, it strives to show honor and be a blessing. Believers who are “submissive to rulers and authorities” strive to “speak evil of no one” even in the political arena (Rom 13:1; Titus 3:1).

III. A Biblical Foundation for Political Positions.

While campaigning in 1980, an exasperated President Jimmy Carter declared, “The Bible doesn’t say how you balance the federal budget!” Evangelical leaders had elevated the most debatable issues to the level of transcendent biblical absolutes. Examples include the Panama Canal give-away, military spending, a flat tax system, and President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative.

The Bible doesn’t reveal the mind of God on net-neutrality or the intricacies of foreign policy. We must accept that while our personal views matter, we are not prophets speaking on behalf of God Himself.

QUESTION: All of us have political issues that matter deeply to us. List some of yours, circle the ones that are *clearly* taught in Scripture, and provide 2-3 verses for support.

Paul Weyrich had urged evangelicals to use “non-religious” language in the political arena. In the 1990s, Ralph Reed encouraged evangelicals to define themselves as “pro-family.” Though evangelicals still affirm the authority of the Bible, they rarely use it to support any of their political positions. Margaret Mitchell of the University of Chicago reached this conclusion after studying hundreds of evangelical websites, statements, and papers. The Bible was hardly to be found.

If God’s Word is foundational to our thinking and reasoning, we *need* to show it. This would mean that when talking about abortion, we explain that the unborn is human life (Psa 139:13-16) and that human life is God’s image (Gen 1:26-28). When speaking about transgenderism, we explain God’s authority to create life and that He created human life as male and female (Gen 5:2).

These short answers are not meant to end all discussion, but they do elevate God’s Word and show an unbelieving world that God’s Word is our foundation.

IV. A Biblical Unity in the Political Arena

The Fundamentals was a series of doctrinal articles published prior to WWI. As theological liberalism made landfall in the United States, some evangelicals wanted to clarify the beliefs that unite them.

The Christian Right since the 1970s has united millions around political issues. The defining feature isn’t a set of doctrines or the gospel but politics. If the “Right” did not claim to be “Christian” this wouldn’t be a biblical issue, but it does. Organizations within the Right have included the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, or The Faith and Freedom Coalition. Though none of these have “Christian” in the name, all strive to unite Christians in their political causes.

Action is emphasized above theology as the Christian Right unites evangelicals with non-evangelicals. The movement grows, our voices are heard, and America takes notice. However, as

Russell Moore explains, “We end up with a public witness in which Mormon talk-show hosts and serially-monogamous casino magnates and prosperity-gospel preachers are welcomed into our ranks, regardless of what violence they do to the gospel. They are, after all, ‘right on the issues.’”

QUESTION: Suppose a group of Bible-believing Christians band together to address an immoral piece of legislation. Should they allow anyone who shares their politics to join or only those who share their gospel? Please explain.

Some, such as Michael Lindsey, have praised evangelicalism for its “elastic orthodoxy.” Yet, evangelicalism has become so elastic, it has no definable orthodoxy. Elasticity allows unity around political issues, but this unity has come at a steep price. The “faith once for all delivered to the saints” is eroding all around us in America, and biblical Christianity is almost no more.

“*What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law, even including the unfortunate ceremonial observances! Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity.*

As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist today.

— J. Gresham Machen

May we be a people who rally around our union with Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection has given us news that is far better and more needed than conservative politics.

V. A Biblical Mission for Political Action.

For more than a century, evangelicals have viewed America as a battlefield with conservatives pitted against liberals in a struggle to save the nation. They have often agreed with Billy Sunday that, “Christianity and Patriotism are synonymous.”

George Marsden has explained at length that evangelicals have been driven to “restore America’s original Christian heritage.” Thus, we have been urged over the last forty years to “take back” America from a radical leftist agenda or to “prepare for inevitable destruction” if we fail. *We must reclaim our “Christian nation” for God!*

QUESTION: Why did Christ die? Did it have anything to do with preserving a culture or heritage? (see Romans 5:10-11)

The problem with the Christian Right is that it claims the name of Christ while setting aside the Word of Christ and not doing the mission of Christ. This kind of activism or engagement is Christian-In-Name-Only and should be rejected.

The church’s mission is to “make disciples” of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). Disciple-making is a lifelong process that begins with the church reaching out to the world with the gospel. We are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20), men and women sent by our King to warn of impending judgment.

“*Neither the Lord in His ministry nor the apostles in theirs set about to reform society as an end in itself... The final end of the church’s witness of good works is revealed everywhere in Scripture as that of causing others to acknowledge God and glorify Him.*

— Robert Saucy

The world needs to hear that sin is wrong and results in judgement. Look at John the Baptist, for instance. He spoke with Herod many times about “all the evil things” Herod had done (Lk 3:18-20). John was not a political activist trying to reform Perea and Galilee, but a faithful prophet. He confronted Herod for the sake of repentance.

Rather than confronting every issue disagreeable to us, the church needs to confront issues that pertain to sin and righteousness. Some believers will want to do this by engaging the political arena. May God use your confrontations of “Herod” to open eyes to the truth of Jesus Christ.