



The Christian

LIVING IN TODAY'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Solomon wrote, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people," (Proverbs 14:34.) How wonderful the world would be if people everywhere lived by those words. Unfortunately such is not the case in our sin-filled world. Here in our own country it's nearly impossible for today's Christian to live completely unaware of the political climate or current issues that are debated in our local, state, and national governments. In many ways our ancestors would find our government unrecognizable with the rhetoric coming from our legislators, the assault on the U.S. Constitution, and the decline in our nation's morals. There is growing hostility among neighbors, relatives, races, and religions as politics becomes ever more polarizing. Christians often find themselves asking how they should deal with today's politics, how involved they should become, and how they can be heard.

WHAT IS A GOVERNMENT?

The role of government is not someone's brainchild. Its purpose was God's plan. Romans 13:1,2 says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." God's purpose for government is to serve as a blessing to mankind so that we might live in peace and orderliness. Sadly, living in a sinful world means this is not always the case.

MANY FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

The Lord established many forms of government. We see several of these in the Bible.

Patriarchy: (A government through the father as head of the family or tribe) A patriarchy was the first type of government established by God. The purpose was for the family head to control the outward behavior of his clan. This form of government continued through the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Absolute Monarchy: (Rule of one with no limits on his or her authority) During Jacob's later years, he and his family moved to Egypt where Joseph provided them with food, land, and security. In Egypt, they were subject to the Pharaoh who ruled as an absolute monarch. The descendants of Jacob suffered greatly under these oppressors.

Theocracy: (Government by God through chosen leaders) After living in Egypt for four hundred years, Jacob's descendants had grown to become a nation of nearly two million people. A short time following their exodus, they camped at Mount Sinai where God established a theocracy. God gave the Israelites detailed laws regarding their civil, ceremonial, and moral lives. Exodus 19:5,6 says, "Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Judges: (Local leaders who exercised authority for shorter periods of time) After Joshua's death, sinful attitudes and behavior arose among the Israelites so God allowed them to be oppressed by neighboring nations. In his love, God appointed local judges, or "deliverers." Some of these judges included Gideon, Samson and Deborah.

Kings: (Ruler of an independent state) During Samuel's judgeship the Israelites began to demand a king so that they might be like other nations. Samuel warned them: "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. . . .When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day." In spite of this warning, God allowed the people to be ruled by a king.

Empires: (Large areas ruled by a single authority) Among the forty-two kings who ruled Israel and Judah, thirty-two were evil and led God's people down sinful paths. Thus God allowed them to become subjects of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. From the days of the captivity through the New Testament, God's people were ruled by foreign empires including Greece and Rome.

JESUS LIVED IN A POLITICAL SOCIETY

What was the political climate at the time of Jesus? Jesus' very birth was influenced by a Caesar's decree for a census and it was marred by a king's decree to kill Bethlehem's baby boys. Later Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was beheaded by the same evil government. The death sentencing of Jesus was pronounced by a Roman governor. Two of Jesus' own disciples had political leanings, Simon the Zealot despised Rome, while Matthew was employed by Rome. Is it any wonder why Jesus' disciples were looking for a new king in Jesus who would set up his special kingdom that would end Roman suppression? John 6:15 reads, "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."

Try to compare the political climate in Jesus' day with the political climate we live in?

WE ARE LIVING IN TWO KINGDOMS

In the great faith chapter of Hebrews 11, we find many of the Old Testament heroes. It concludes: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one." These godly people realized they were citizens of two kingdoms: a heavenly spiritual kingdom and an earthly political kingdom. Today we still live in two kingdoms.

THE CHRISTIAN'S ROLE IN THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM

Because of our heavenly citizenship we are considered strangers and foreigners on earth. Our eventual home is in heaven. Yet we do not need to wait to belong to that kingdom for we are already citizens. Philippians 3:20 states, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ." God's children already enjoy the blessings of being members of God's kingdom.

THE CHRISTIAN'S ROLE IN THE EARTHLY KINGDOM

God established earthly governments to carry out his plans. Certainly there may be times we do not understand why God would allow despots like Hitler, Nero, and Stalin. Yet God's plans are far beyond our understanding. In Isaiah 55:8,9 God makes this clear, "'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Respecting God's omniscience, we therefore respect those whom

God has placed in high positions. In Isaiah the Lord calls King Cyrus his “anointed” one, and in Jeremiah he calls Nebuchadnezzar “my servant.”

In our earthly kingdom we are God’s ambassadors and representatives where we will work to share the gospel message. In this kingdom we must live as responsible citizens. This includes **support** for our government through taxes. Jesus paid tax as we see in Matthew 22:19-21, “‘Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’” The apostle Paul wrote about this also in Romans 13:7, “If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” We do this realizing that they will not always be used for godly purposes. Second, we **honor** our rulers and their offices, not slandering them or disrespecting their position. Third, we **obey** the government. Peter’s first letter says clearly, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors.” Lastly, we are to **pray** for the government. 1 Timothy 2:1,2 says, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority.” We should not be surprised to see sinful acts in our government and its leaders such as legalizing homosexual marriages and allowing abortion. These are the result of sinful natures.

Why is it important that our children see our support, honor, obedience and prayer for the government?

Why does God allow wicked governments to exist, especially when they are hostile to his own people?

What can a Christian do to protest an unjust and evil government? First, we might ask what should the Christian not do? We must not throw up our arms because all seems lost or hopeless. Rather we should take comfort in Daniel’s words, “He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up the rulers” (Daniel 2:21); “The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people” (Daniel 4:17). Second, we are not to show open rebellion. God has the final say, and there will come a day when he will bring revenge upon the evildoers. Romans 12:19 tells us, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

How does the Christian’s view of the future differ from the unbeliever’s view?

Realizing that the Christian lives in two kingdoms, how does that affect the thinking of a Christian compared to an unbeliever who lives in only one kingdom?

Endurance: In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus encouraged his followers to “turn the other cheek” to an evil person. Jesus’ conduct before Pilate, Herod, and the Jews are examples that he patiently endured the treatment he was receiving. First Peter 2:23 says, “When they hurled their insults at him [Jesus], he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

Prayer: When the Assyrians attacked Jerusalem, King Hezekiah prayed for and received deliverance. We also pray for God to guide the decisions of those in authority. We pray that their ruling would benefit society, that they may be led to God and his Word, and that they govern according to God’s laws and precepts.

What might we include in our prayers for the government?

Warnings: We also have examples of Christians who warned or admonished those in authority. Reading the Old Testament we find numerous admonitions to the rulers against ungodliness. Moses warned Pharaoh about the impending final plagues and it did not sit well with Pharaoh as we read in Exodus 10:28, “Pharaoh said to Moses, ‘Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die.’”

Jeremiah warned the king about the destruction that was about to come. In the New Testament, John the Baptist boldly admonished Herod for his sinful lifestyle. Luke 3:19,20 says, "But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison."

Legal Action: At times legal action is also justified. The apostle Paul demanded his rights as a Roman citizen. Fortunately we live in a country that offers us that special right.

Passive Disobedience: Scripture is filled with examples of passive disobedience. When the government orders us to act contrary to what God's Word says, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29.) When Pharaoh declared that all the male babies were to be drowned in the Nile, this is what we read in Exodus 1:5-21, "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.' The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live? The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.' So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own."

Daniel refused to cooperate with a malicious law that forbade him to worship God as well as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar. The apostles continued to preach Christ crucified even when the Sanhedrin banned such preaching.

Likewise Queen Esther admitted she was placing her life in jeopardy when she decided she must approach the king with a plea for her people. Esther 4:11,16, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. . . [Esther said] 'I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'"

Where is the line drawn between what we must tolerate and when we must disobey? Throughout the ages Christians have wrestled with this dilemma. Times may occur when God's people must choose to obey the higher authority of God, realizing there may be extreme consequences as with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. In no instance, however, are violent means or outright rebellion warranted. Romans 12 again warns, "He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

How could Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego remain true to their godly principles yet serve an ungodly government?

The Sanhedrin arrested Peter and John for preaching the Gospel. In Acts 4:18-20 we read, "Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'" How would you have reacted in that situation? Where would you draw the line in obedience to the government?

GOD'S PEOPLE WHO SERVED IN GOVERNMENT

Throughout Scripture God placed his people in high government positions. Joseph wore Pharaoh's personal ring after he was appointed second in all of Egypt. Moses was raised in the house of Pharaoh's daughter. Young David served in the king's palace when Saul was tormented. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego served as top advisors to Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel served leaders in three different foreign governments as a

respected authority for the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians. Esther became the queen of Persia upon her marriage to King Xerxes. (These examples dismiss the arguments of some religions such as the Amish who claim it is not god-pleasing to serve in government positions.)

GOD'S PEOPLE STILL SERVE IN GOVERNMENT

In many countries people live under a we/they form of government in which the people (we) have little or no say in the government (they). Some of these countries are hostile to religion, especially Christianity. The Pew Research Center suggests that 70% of the world's population live in countries with high restrictions on religion. Open Doors USA claims 1 in 9 Christians live where Christianity is illegal, forbidden, or punished.

We are blessed to live in a country with a we/we form of government in which the people have a direct role in making and carrying out its laws. We thank God for guiding the founding fathers to respect the Judeo/Christian laws set down by God. The religious foundation that shaped America has been influential in our world in many ways. This blessing should not be taken for granted. Christians should welcome this right and take full advantage of it, not with the purpose of purifying government or turning our country into a Christian nation, but out of love for all people. The Bible doesn't tell us to go into the world to change the culture. Rather it says we are to go and spread the Gospel.

Vote: The Christian is free to vote for representatives to lawmaking bodies. We should be certain to be examples to our children by showing them that we take every advantage of the right to vote.

What do you say to those who refuse to vote for a candidate because of past indiscretions?

Service: Christians have many ways they can be part of the government process as citizen workers or serving in the armed forces. A Christian also has the right to seek public office. We should be thankful for Christians who have decided to use their talents for the betterment of all people.

Lobbying: As Christian citizens we should also consider the possibility of lobbying or reasoning through letters and phone calls with a Christian point of view. Many politicians have changed course because of a few personal contacts by concerned citizens.

Informed and Educated: Lastly, it behooves Christians entrusted with such rights to be informed and educated on the issues. Being well-educated cannot be overstressed. The Christian who avoids any and all involvement in the political world has no right to object to its policies and decisions. Rather, the Christian should be leading the community in their attention to the governmental processes around them.

We have been blessed to live in a free country that allows us to vote and enjoy the many freedoms we have. That gives us good reason when praying to not only offer petitions for our country's shortcomings and needs, but to also thank God for this great blessing that has allowed his Word to be freely preached.

Explain: "The key to a Christian view of citizenship is moderation and a balance between the extreme of placing too much trust and energy into human efforts to improve the world and the opposite error of sitting back and doing nothing because we feel that the situation is hopeless." (Brug)

Do you agree or disagree with Winston Churchill who once exclaimed, "Democracy is the worst form of government that has been invented by man, except for every other form that we have tried."