

Faithful Citizenship When Kingdoms Collide

Romans 13:1-7

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Steve DeWitt

This is our fifth and final message on government from Romans 13:1-7. What have we learned? Government is God's common grace for the organizing of human society. God is a God of order. Anarchy is a functional blasphemy of his character. So, to restrain disorder, God built order and governance in every sphere of his presence. There is governance in the Trinity, in the perfect angelic realm, in marriage, family, and the church. Governance isn't the problem. The problem is the sinners governing the sinners sinfully. This is always the problem. We never have angels running for public office.

God's will for human government is summarized in Romans 13 as promoting the good by incentivizing and approving those who do it. Punishing the bad by law and the sword and thereby providing a restraint on human depravity and evil. Affirm the good. Punish the bad. Romans 13 also explains the Christian's posture toward government. All government authority (including the ones we don't like) is authority granted to it by God. A Christian submits to the lesser human authority as an act of worship to the higher authority, God himself. We are to do what is approved by those over us. And pay our taxes as a conscientious act of worship to God.

The net effect is that a Christian is a dual citizen: a citizen of the kingdom of man and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus explained that this citizenship means that we render to Caesar things that are his and to God the things that are his (see image below).



This is a critical distinction to avoid the error of making the church an earthly government (like the Holy Roman Empire was or the crusades confused) or the church a state institution (like the church of England or the German Lutheran Church). When the government becomes the church or the church becomes the government, it always compromises the church. There must be separation, and Jesus taught the same. Go back and listen to those messages on our website if you missed any for further explanation.

This may all sound convoluted and perhaps when church and state function as they ought, we can be confused, and it still works out okay. But when these roles are blurred or under attack, then God's people must have a clear biblical understanding. Otherwise we are easily sucked into the vortex of cultural compromise or capitulation. The days we are living in may or may not be that, but they certainly are revealing peoples' core values and identities.

I was recently with a pastor whose church is being torn apart by the politics and cultural wars of our day. He said to me, "I'm convinced many of my people are more pastored by Tucker Carlson than by me." He is an outstanding pastor, but like never before, God's people are tribalizing and following leaders outside their own church community. Further, Christians are fracturing along identities that have nothing to do with Christ. It's mostly Caesar stuff.

What is our core identity? A political ideology? Opinions about a virus? I saw a funny cartoon where a man is at his computer and he declares, "I can't wait for the pandemic to be over so we can all go back to being constitutional lawyers."¹

My urging is that our identity must reflect 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away...the new has come" (ESV). Our core identity must not be in the Caesar stuff. Our core identity must be who we are in Christ: recipients of the grace of God, the gospel message of Jesus dying on the cross for my sins, resurrected on the third day, conquering death, granting the gift of eternal life. The Caesar stuff is all part of a world that is passing away, and if you tether to that...good luck. We as Christians are tethered to the eternal. Our core identity has to be who we are in Jesus, otherwise all these cultural, tribal things will become our core identity: political party, race, pandemic warfare and so on. "In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song."²

Should Christians be Involved in Government?

Yes or no? Should Christians seek public office? Should Christians vote, if they are in a democracy? These are not easy questions and Christians have practiced varying approaches, somewhat dependent on the particular government over them at the time. Special thanks to Jonathon Leeman and Wayne Grudem for their helpful writings here. Let's start with three wrong approaches.

Disengagement

Think monks and monasteries here. Disengagement. *Let's go find a mountaintop and wait for either government to improve or Jesus to come. Let the world burn! Our citizenship is in heaven! The barbarians are here, let's go to the bunker. Let Babylon burn!*

This certainly isn't the example of Jesus who could have remained cloistered in heaven but instead engaged human society. Many of the heroes of the Bible were involved in government and very positively influenced their society. Here are some:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Empire</u>
Joseph	2 nd to Pharaoh	Egyptian Empire
Nehemiah	Cupbearer to the king	Persian Empire (Artaxerxes)
Mordecai	2 nd to the king	Persian Empire (Ahasuerus)
Daniel	High official/wise man	Babylonian Empire (Nebuchadnezzar)

Daniel in particular provides a counter to those who want to disengage from government. He was taken to a foreign land, but soon his gifts and character put him in close proximity to the ruler of the world at the time. He didn't shrink from it, but he also didn't compromise—even facing the famous lion's den to be a faithful witness for God in the pagan Babylonian empire. *Dare to be a Daniel...* They don't tend to write songs about monks.

Surrender

This is the capitulation option. The church just becomes a vassal of the state. Examples include the German church under Nazi rule or the Russian Orthodox Church under the USSR or presently the Three Self Church in China. When Caesar demands surrender, the true

¹ Source Unknown.

² Words and Music by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend, Copyright © 2001 Kingsway Thankyou Music.

church does what the underground church in China has done. Not surrender, but thrive under persecution.

I have stood in the church in Wittenberg, Germany where Hitler installed his own hand-picked head of the National German Church. Bonhoeffer was at the event and whispered to his friend Martin Niemöller, *you are now witnessing the death of the church in Germany*. That's surrender. When the church capitulates to the state.

Political success = spiritual success

This confusion of the mission of the church trades making disciples for political power. It downgrades the holy church into just another political action group. As an example, to this day, you say "Moral Majority" and what do people think? Christians forcing their agenda down our throats. Even former leaders of the Moral Majority like Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson have repented of this approach. Beware of wrapping the cross in the American flag (or any other flag for that matter).

Some years ago, one of the candidates for president contacted our church and asked if they could hold a rally right here in our auditorium. What would you say to that? If your thought is, *it depends on who it was*, you are missing the point. None of the priorities of a church are accomplished by political power. That's why Jesus told Pilate; *my kingdom is not of this world*.

If we shouldn't go into a bunker, or surrender, or compromise, what should we do? I agree with Dr. Grudem and what he calls, "significant influence."

How Should Christians be Involved in Government? *Significant Influence*

"The 'significant influence' view says that Christians should seek to influence civil government according to God's moral standards and God's purposes for government as revealed in the Bible (when rightly understood). But while Christians exercise this influence, they must simultaneously insist on protecting freedom of religion for all citizens. In addition, 'significant influence' does not mean angry, belligerent, intolerant, judgmental, red-faced, and hate-filled influence, but rather winsome, kind, thoughtful, loving, persuasive influence that is suitable to each circumstance and that always protects the other person's right to disagree, but that is also uncompromising about the truthfulness and moral goodness of the teachings of God's Word."³ (Wayne Grudem)

Significant influence means that the church must retain its prophetic role. Anything that smells like politicizing the church or the gospel must be avoided. As an example, Billy Graham was an advisor to presidents but didn't endorse them.

But that doesn't mean becoming a monastery either. Light influences darkness wherever it goes, and Jesus called Christians the light of the world. We should do everything we can to influence society and government toward the light. Light here isn't republicanism or term limits or border walls. It's moral light. Light that guides governments to lead toward God's common grace for human flourishing.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34).

³ Wayne Grudem, *Politics to the Glory of God: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 55.

Where Christianity influences, that influence is toward God's wisdom and will—things like human dignity, morality, the inherent value of human life, religious freedom, justice, punishment of evil, promotion of his gifts to society including marriage, family, and loving your neighbor. Think of the moral principles behind the influence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or William Wilberforce in England two centuries ago. Both appealed to man's conscience in the treatment of human beings. One changed the British Empire, the other the American empire.

"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" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Seek the good of your city. Pray for your city. Pray for your leaders. Paul writes to Timothy urging prayers for *"for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior"* (1 Timothy 2:2–3).

Pray for governors over us that they would make decisions that allow us to live peaceful and productive lives. This pleases God. How about we up our prayer game in this category?

Christians should seek to significantly influence every category of society

Love your neighbor as yourself includes using every tool available to promote human flourishing. Seeking the good of our city. We should want clean water, quality healthcare, etc. We should be influencing stakeholders and powerbrokers toward love and justice for our neighbor. I want Bethel Church in Northwest Indiana to be the kind of church that when the chips are down, people turn to us, including government leaders. We build trust. We build relationships.

Christians can serve in government as a means to significant influence

Some Christians may choose to seek public office. This is completely legitimate as long as political power isn't seen as a means to an end that only the gospel can provide. We need more Christian statesman-types on all levels of government.

In a democracy, voting is a Christian stewardship

We are blessed to live in a democracy where we possess a small stake in the government. A vote. In the US, each of us are 1/330 millionth Caesar. If we are to pray for peace and the good of our city, shouldn't we at minimum vote toward those same goals? Shouldn't we vote for candidates who, as best as we can tell, will lead and legislate toward God's will? They are all sinners, so nothing is guaranteed. Still, I urge you to vote. There are many local races determined within a margin where our membership's vote would sway the outcome. I urge you to vote and take your Christianity into the ballot box with you.

Christians Must Submit to Caesar—are There Any Exceptions?

The answer is unequivocally yes, there are exceptions. We see a clear example in the early church. The proclamation of the gospel in Jerusalem was compelling thousands of Jews to leave rabbinic Judaism and follow Jesus. Did this sit well with the religious leaders? No. Acts 5 says the Apostles were brought before the Jewish leaders who demanded they stop preaching the gospel of Jesus. Here's the key verse,

"But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

God told them to preach Jesus. The government told them not to. When is it required to disobey civil government? ***When Caesar requires us to do what God forbids or forbids what God requires.***

History is filled with examples. In the Bible, Pharaoh required the Jewish midwives to kill the Jewish babies. They refused. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were required to bow to the image of Nebuchadnezzar. They refused. The apostles disobeyed the order not to preach Jesus.

That said, be very careful not to see every crisis of choice or preference as the exception clause. We can easily view personal inconvenience as persecution, or any time I don't agree, I don't have to. How do we know this?

Romans 13. Remember, Paul writes that the Romans are to submit to one of the most anti-Christian regimes in history. Do you think these Roman Christians were fans of Caesar? Emperor worship? No. You could walk through the parking lot of the Roman church and not find any of them with a bumper sticker that says "Hail, Caesar!" on it. Paul says, submit anyway.

World War II created many difficult ethical questions along this line. If Hitler is your Caesar, do you obey him? The first week of this series, I got this question. The answer is yes, unless he is requiring you to sin. Did German Christians serve as soldiers and secretaries in World War II? For sure. But in the SS? At Buchenwald or Auschwitz? No way. What about Oscar Schindler? Should he have done what he did to save Jews by hiring them in his factories? His famous list? Yes. Should Bonhoeffer have participated in the assassination attempt on Hitler? He was a Christian ethicist who wrote a book on ethics. He struggled. He famously said, "*Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.*"⁴ Schindler and Bonhoeffer represent creative obedience in incredibly difficult circumstances in order to obey God's moral will. Others as well.

Human life is sacred. Therefore, *Anne Frank, you may hide in our closet.* Or another famous example, *welcome to the Ten Booms, dear Jewish friends, you may hide here. Oh, this is our daughter Corrie.* These are difficult questions with literally life and death hanging in the balance. What's the line in the sand? *Is obeying Caesar disobeying God?* That had better be very clear for this exception clause to be invoked. In my whole life I've never done so. At least, not yet.

How about we run a test case through this grid. *Pastor Steve, what about the pandemic shut down and government mandates on wearing masks and all this social distancing?* We are posting a *Bethel Backstage* later today where we explore this more deeply. Let's apply the test. Is wearing a mask a sin? I didn't ask, is it inconvenient? Undesirable? Smell-your-own-breath terrible? Solid yes to all that. Is it sin? Got a verse?

But Caesar can't tell us what to do in the church! In fact, Caesar tells us all kinds of things we have to do in the church. We have to have so many handicap parking spots. Obey human resources and employer laws. Have a certain number of fire alarms and decibels. It is a long list of things in the church Caesar tells us we have to do. We get few, if any, complaints about these things. Why? *Those are safety things!* I agree. The safety of children and the handicapped and food preparation and load requirements for support beams for the

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer as quoted by Eric Metaxas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Study Guide: The Life and Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 59.

balcony are all in Caesar's God-ordained circle. Is community health? Or do you put that in the church's circle? Whether masks are actually effective or not, or social distancing is effective or not, doesn't matter. Caesar seems convinced. We should submit.

Now if the mask is actually a muzzle, then Acts 5:29 applies. Or if the mask is a filter. *You can say this. You are not allowed to say that.* No way. We disobey. *But I don't think the mask does anything!* You can appeal to Caesar and change his mind. If Caesar doesn't, then for you it's just one more thing in a long line of governmental stupidity. But don't make too much of masks and mandates. In terms of ethical difficulty and civic disobedience, wearing a mask isn't exactly 1941 Berlin stuff. Not even close.

If Caesar forbid us from *ever* gathering, what would we do? This was the case in Rome years after Romans was written. I have walked through portions of the catacombs outside Rome where Christians literally dug tunnels and spaces so they could gather underground. Christians secretly gather in many places in the world. If Caesar forbid us from ever gathering—not for public health reasons or we are being bombed or some other temporary reason within Caesar's jurisdiction—then Bethel Church starts tunneling. Pass the shovel.

Until then, we take the Schindler approach and creatively work within the bounds Caesar allows in the jurisdictions God has given Caesar. Have we done that? We are doing services inside within Caesar's rules. We went outside with services also within Caesar's parameters. We are online as well. Do we all like all this? Actually, I'm very much enjoying the outdoor services! Do we all agree with it? Likely not, but this shouldn't mean one thing in terms of our church's unity because our core identity isn't political or pandemical, but who we are in Christ.

This is where Paul goes. Here is the very next verse, "*Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law*" (Romans 13:8). Caesar doesn't require we love each other, but Christ does. So, you can be right on masks and wrong on love. You can be right on healthcare policy or immigration or taxation or whatever and hugely wrong on love. So far, Caesar hasn't forbid us from loving one another.

Let's get Caesar right and render to him. Let's get God right and render all things to him. Let's get love right and render to each other by putting each other's needs and opinions ahead of our own.

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