



A Christian Approach to Politics

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Current Issues from a Biblical Worldview



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So it's an election year again. And even when it isn't, people are thinking about the next one. They're looking for a deliverer, someone to solve our country's problems. And they're saying the world will end if their guy doesn't get elected.

This apocalyptic thinking is not new. It's been a feature of politics in our country since at least the days of President Adams—the first one—and similar things have been going on in other democratically oriented countries (Great Britain, for instance) since before there was a United States of America. Candidates seek political office, for the most part, because politics is about power and the simplest way to get The People to give you power is to appeal to their fears.

How does a Christian deal responsibly with this imperfect—sometimes even repulsive—political system? There is a whole spectrum of possible approaches, and any spectrum has its extremes. At one end is the extreme of withdrawing from the whole process because it's broken and because it's tainted with corruption and because it's “of this world.” At the other end is the extreme of making political activism our last best hope for reclaiming our culture for Christ.

As Christians we look to the Scripture for guidance about this decision and all the others. And the Scripture provides principles that can guide our choices, keep us away from the extremes, and direct us to a life of diligent peace.

What are the significant biblical principles that can inform our political decisions?

Big Biblical Ideas

Sovereignty

The Bible begins and ends with God doing as He wishes, in infinite power and authority. He is the first ruler; He sets up the first government,¹ He claims responsibility for setting up and deposing

¹ There is evidence of government very early in Genesis; Cain built a city in 4:17. Most conservative Bible scholars find the first clear evidence of divinely ordained government in 9:5–6 where God gives Noah, immediately after the flood, the authority to carry out capital punishment for cases of murder.

rulers (Dan. 2:21), and He even refers to the powerful pagan emperor Cyrus as His “anointed” (Isa. 45:1).²

In recent years governments have tended more toward democratic forms than the autocracies that were nearly universal in biblical times. We have presidents, not kings; and we elect them. But the Scripture extends the sovereignty of God over the decisions of peoples as well as their rulers. His will is done by “the inhabitants of the earth” (Dan. 4:35), an expression that is all-inclusive. He rules over “the nations” (Ps. 22:28), including the peoples as well as their kings. He influenced the choices of all the Canaanite peoples to fight against Israel so that they might be destroyed (Josh. 11:20). God's will is done in all things (Isa. 46:11)—in democratic countries as well as in dictatorships.

This brings us to some unavoidable truths. God's will is done in our electoral processes. We choose the presidents and governors and legislators and dog-catchers that God has already chosen for us. The leaders we don't like, and didn't vote for, are God's choice for us just as certainly as those we do like and did vote for. Believers who are liberal Democrats need to acknowledge that Ronald Reagan was God's choice for president in the 80's. And believers who are conservative Republicans or who are so conservative that they're not even Republicans, need to acknowledge that Barack Obama was God's choice for president in more recent days. God's will is done.

Responsibility

Even as God directs in human events, He expects certain choices of us, and He holds us responsible for those choices; those choices matter. The New Testament is filled with imperative verbs—nearly 2,000 of them, in fact—and many of those are commands from God to His people. He expects us to make decisions to choose His will over that of His enemies, and He brings consequences to pass based on the choices we make. There are many examples of such consequences in the Old Testament; the first was Eve's choice to lead her husband into sin, and God pronounced consequences on her for that

² And God makes this statement more than a century before Cyrus is even born. The Hebrew word here is “meshiach,” “messiah.”

choice (Gen. 3:16). But the New Testament is no less pronounced in its emphasis on our responsibility. As just one example, Jesus pronounces consequences on 6 of the 7 churches in Revelation 2–3 because of their choices. And he warns the seventh one, Smyrna, of the consequences of future choices (2:10).

So our choices do matter. We can't withdraw from political action simply because whatever happens is God's will. He wants active followers, not passive stoics.

Stewardship

Even more specifically, God has given us things to do as we prepare for future life in His presence. Jesus said that we are to “occupy” until He comes (Lk. 19:13). A significant part of that consists of evangelism and discipleship—what we call the “Great Commission” (Matt. 28:19–20). But there is also the responsibility of stewardship in other areas, of which Jesus often spoke (Lk. 12:42; 16:1–9; see also 1 Cor. 4:1–2). We are to be diligent about other responsibilities God has left in our care. This involves many things, among them nurturing our marriages (Eph. 5:22–33), discipling our children (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21), supporting our families (2 Thess. 3:10–12; 1 Tim. 5:8), and exercising our gifts in the body of Christ (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4).

God specifically includes in this stewardship attention to our rulers; we are to pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1–2) and be subject to them (1 Pet. 2:13–15; Rom. 13:1–6). In this latter context Paul makes a remarkable statement: “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour” (v. 7). So we're to give serious thought to those in civil authority over us, see them as a gift from God, respect and submit to them, and be diligent to treat them appropriately and supportively.

Now, these things were written in a time when all rulers were authoritarians of some sort. In the biblical world, people didn't get to choose their rulers.³ If believers were to give such serious thought to their civic relationships in an environment where choices were few and far between, how carefully should the believer consider his civic obligations in an environment filled with—indeed, characterized by—choices?

³ I am aware of the Greek democracies. But they were off the world stage by New Testament times, and in any case they never interacted significantly with the biblical world.

Stewardship, if it is to mean anything, means that we should take our campaigns and elections seriously; we should study the candidates, evaluate their positions, and seek to elect those who will most likely implement a state where we can “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). We might well even consider whether we can best be ambassadors for Christ in public office ourselves.

Faith

The Christian life begins with faith, or trust (Eph. 2:8), and it continues the same way (2 Cor. 5:7). We are sheep, and we trust and follow our Shepherd (Ps. 23; John 10). When times get tough—even to the point of persecution—we don't despair, for we know that God will deliver us from every potential trial that is not His will for us (2 Pet. 2:9), and He will equip us for victory in every trial that is (1 Cor. 10:13). In suffering we realize that we are following the example of Christ Himself (2 Pet. 2:19–25). We don't fret when we lose, knowing that God has never lost an election, and we are under His care.

Eternity

This world is not our home. We are designed by God to live forever, in a world that is not like this broken one. Solomon makes it clear that we will not find our final satisfaction here; the world we live in now yields only “vanity and vexation of spirit,” or frustration (Eccles. 1:14). Thus, while we seek to steward our opportunities at election time, we do not see elections as apocalyptic events; losing is not the end of the world—in fact, the end of the world is not a bad thing—and winning is not everything.

This concept should give us great equanimity and peace in the midst of frenetic, heated, and vicious political campaigns. We need not feel the knot in the pit of our stomachs when lies are told about our guy, or when things don't go our way. Politics is important, and we need to be diligent and give it our best shot. But it's temporary at best.

Putting It All into Practice

So where do we go from here?

- We start by paying attention—reading and learning, developing a political philosophy that is consistent with our understanding of Scripture, and evaluating candidates for public office in light of that philosophy.

- Then we steward our opportunities—voting, at least, for the candidates we support, but probably supporting them in other ways as well, and perhaps offering ourselves as candidates in situations where doing so would be good stewardship.
- We trust God for the outcomes, and we thank Him for them, even when we don't understand His purposes.
- We seek His face in repentance when it appears that He is calling us to it (Dan. 9).
- We rejoice in God's care for us in providing leadership and a system that enables us to serve God as He has called us to do. We pray for God's grace in allowing our service to continue, whatever the political circumstances (Acts 4:23–31).
- In victory and in defeat, in prosperity and in hard times, we demonstrate—visibly—our faith in God and our joy in Him. In so doing we open the door to evangelizing the lost—for some of whom political victory is everything—and to building up our fellow believers, encouraging them to look beyond the temporal to the eternal.

In all these ways we best represent Christ in a broken world, calling our fellow travelers to a life more abundant and a joy unspeakable. This kind of life makes a difference, not just for the next four years—or even the next reich—but for a million years and more.