

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

MATTHEW 5:13-16



CHAPTER 2

Should Believers Be Involved in Politics?

What a privilege it is for me to bring you, our nation's Public Servants, my insights on the Christian walk as it relates to your life in government, gleaned from the Word of God, the Bible. We will touch on both the personal application of the truths found in God's Word, and the application that has an eye toward public policy and the national effects of following, and not following, God's Word. We embark on our journey with a few assumptions: Firstly, that God's Word is the final word on what is best for us as individuals and in the governance of our nation. Secondly, we proceed on the assumption that government is a proper place for believers to function in society. Some may not agree with this second assumption. For that reason, we begin by addressing this concern. Should believers in Jesus restrict themselves to personal evangelism, and stay out of government?

I used to be in the camp that argues against political involvement by believers, but that began to change some years ago when I personally witnessed the leading advocate of this position, a megachurch pastor in Southern California, rally his congregation to attend and show support en masse at a city council meeting. At that meeting the decision would be made as to whether the Christian college where he was president would be granted a land-use permit to construct a memorial chapel in his name. This glaring incongruity coalesced with my growing realization that I could not minister to believers in the California Capitol building if deep down I believed they were out of step with God’s will by being involved in the political process. Those experiences opened me up to thinking through to the other side of this debate and to studying the Word on this matter with less of a predisposition.

Today I come down on the side that believers *are* to be involved in politics rather than isolated from it. In short, if every believer adhered to this somewhat popular evangelical teaching against political involvement, there would be no believers in office! There would be no *salt* and *light* influence in a representative form of government. What follows are the Biblical arguments for participation in the governance of the State in ways beyond personal evangelism.

The fact that believers should affect the world in which they live rather than isolate themselves from it is evident from the Sermon on the Mount. Note Matthew 5:13–16:

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

When Jesus lights a lamp—that is, when He brings an individual to true saving faith in Himself—what results is a person who “*gives light to all who are in the house.*”¹ This is not difficult to decipher from this passage. The word *house* (v. 15) is another way of expressing two previously used words in the passage. This simply means a believer will affect people on the *earth* (v. 13a), and people in the *world* (v. 14a). This passage teaches that it is normal for believers to influence the physical *earth/world*, or the land in which they live.

Notice the progression of this passage: verses 13–16 come after verses 1–12 of Matthew 5, which are commonly known as Jesus’ Beatitudes. The Beatitudes teach concise virtues (listed in the opening portion of His Sermon on the Mount) that are characteristic of His mature followers: *gentleness* (v. 5), *righteousness* (vv. 6, 10), *mercifulness* (v. 7), *purity* (v. 8), etc. Recognizing the progressive nature of this passage, we see that our ability to be salt and light—expressing the idea that believers are to be preservers and illuminators in the earth/world—is founded on these

virtues. The point is that we cannot affect our surroundings in a godly way unless we first possess godly character.

How we affect the world is intrinsically linked to who we are.

Such an interpretation of the meaning of this passage is supported by the following key grammatical understandings: firstly, the twice-used verb at the beginning of verses 13 and 14 is “you are” (*humeis este*). This verb is present active indicative in the Greek language, in contrast to imperative. This is a subtle but important distinction. It means *we are* Christ-influencing in culture—agents of the preservation and illumination of truth—to the degree that we are mature in Christ. Jesus is not saying, “I command you to be salt and light!” Rather, He is teaching that when you manifest Christlikeness, you affect your world, or in the case of the Capital Community, its people and its laws. In other words, Jesus is saying, “*you are* preserving and illuminating society to the degree that you are *beatitudinal!*” If we seek to be beatitudinal, always connected to Christlike maturity—we preserve and illuminate the world!

Secondly, notice the beginning of the next verse, verse 16, in the original language. The adverb at the start of the passage further supports the idea of Jesus’ sequential thinking relative to what He has previously delineated. “*Let your light shine before men in such a way.*” “In such a way” (*houtos*) means “in this way,” or “thus.” That is, our light is to shine according to what has already been said. Here the verb “shine” (*lampo*) is in the imperative, meaning God is commanding you. In other words, our *light* must *shine* in this way. And what is this *way*? That others *see* our godly character and the resulting preservation and illumination in the world. What results is that others “*glorify your Father who is in heaven.*” That is to say, by following this formula you can become a powerful witness in a fallen world! Here is a summation:

Spiritual Maturation
(Matthew 5:1–12)

Cultural Participation
(Matthew 5:13–15)

World Evangelization
(Matthew 5:16)

Personal spiritual maturity will be followed by cultural participation, which then testifies of God to an onlooking world. This progression reveals the Biblical formula for effective testimony—for glorifying God in a fallen world.

To those who say that the believer should only be about evangelism, this passage speaks to their omission of a vital and necessary step: cultural participation in the world is essential to becoming an effective witness!

Can an evangelist who shuns cultural involvement be effective?² The idea that one should be all about evangelism without cultural engagement is an unbiblical misconception. Matthew 5 does not support that idea; Jesus Himself does not support it. This passage lends to correcting such thinking. One cannot bypass the need for evangelists to be preservers and illuminators within the context of their culture—that is, in the world.

And if this argument is insufficient, what follows are additional Biblically supported reasons why believers should be involved in politics.

Evangelism alone is too narrow an understanding of the mission of Jesus.

In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20 Jesus commands His followers to do more than just teach others the Gospel, as important as that is. He commands believers to go beyond evangelism and “*make disciples.*” How is the believer to do that? By “*teaching [others] to observe all that I commanded you.*” Paul echoes this when he says to the Ephesian elders, “*For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God*” (Acts 20:27). Paul says regarding all of his writings, “*The things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment*” (1 Corinthians 14:37). Peter says regarding his *beyond-salvation* teachings: “*that you should remember ... the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles*” (2 Peter 3:2). Jesus wants others to know *all* of His instruction. That means He wants His followers to learn about marriage, family, church, commerce, and government. This is required to make disciples. While the primary objective of Jesus’ mission is to convert the lost, the entirety of His message encompasses making disciples.

The notion that the believer should only evangelize political leaders and not get involved in politics represents myopic thinking. It follows from this idea that evangelists would need to counsel their Public-Servant converts to immediately leave office, and if every elected leader were won to Christ the government would have to shut down!

So, what does Jesus teach—what is “*the whole counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27 NKJV)—regarding civil government? Among other things it is this: He Himself created it (Genesis 1:26; Colossians 1:16); He ordained it (Romans 13:1); He sustains it (Colossians 1:17); and it is intended to restrain a fallen world (Romans 13:4). In addition to His saving grace, Jesus’ purposes, compelled by a heart of compassion for the lost (Matthew 9:36), manifest common grace and restraining grace to all of His creation (Matthew 5:45b) through this ordained institution. How great is His love!

Jesus has a purpose for the institution of government besides evangelism. One of the leading advocates for the “evangelism, not politics” viewpoint states:

[Jesus] did not come to earth to make the old creation moral through social and governmental reform but to make new creatures (His people) holy through the saving power of the gospel and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.³

He is propagating too narrow an understanding of the mission of Jesus! This does not represent the whole counsel of God because it does not acknowledge His purposes for His institution of civil government. As important as evangelism is, in government as elsewhere, there must always be the broader understanding of Jesus' teachings regarding government. The believer must also be about teaching what Scripture says about civil government and more specifically, teaching these truths to civil government leaders!

Another error of this same influential Christian author is his tendency to spiritualize away the importance of good civil government in the propagation of the Gospel. He states:

The ideal human government can ultimately do nothing to advance God's kingdom, and the worst, most despotic worldly government in the end cannot halt the power of the Holy Spirit or the spread of God's Word.⁴

In an ultimate sense, in view of the sovereignty of God what is said here is true. But is this a tenable argument for non-involvement in civil government by believers? One does not have to be much of a student of current geopolitics, world history, or historic missions to know that Middle Eastern countries, North Korea, Cuba, and Russia, among others, have suppressed the growth of the Body of Christ to a much greater degree than other countries. How many missionaries have come forth from the aforementioned lands? Practically speaking, why have 90 percent of world missions in the past century been funded by America? Shouldn't believers be involved in politics if for no other reason than to promote the spreading of God's Word? The nation that sends out missionaries can advance God's Kingdom.

Good government is important to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Countries that honor freedom make possible the pursuit of the Great Commission, as seen presently and in history. That means the believer's role in sustaining a country's health and well-being is noble and important, and is in keeping with what Jesus commanded us.

To illustrate one of many possible results of living by too narrow an understanding of the mission of Jesus, consider that radio preachers must now edit their radio broadcasts in Canada so as to not include any mention of Romans 1. This is due to new Canadian laws introduced by non-Christians. This life-changing book addresses the severity of sin, the principle of justification, the importance of faith, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit, among other major issues of faith. What will become of the great radio ministries in the U.S. that have so affected our culture for good and evangelized to the lost if our laws, devoid of Christian influence, also begin to limit our freedoms?⁵ Government can indeed facilitate or hinder the advance of God's kingdom.

Shouldn't believers be involved in civil government if only for the sake of the Great Commission? Indeed, church leaders should applaud, respect, support, sustain, prepare, and elect more Christian political leaders to, among other things, preserve the leaders' freedom to propagate the Gospel. Christian Legislators that I know view themselves in a partnership with pastors. In turn, pastors should view themselves in partnership with Christian Legislators.

Should the Church raise up young men and women to run for office with the same passion and enthusiasm that it places on raising up godly pastors, wives, husbands, children, and businessmen? Absolutely, yes!

The mission of Jesus includes the transformation of society.

If “*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” is central to the Great Commission as the starting point for making disciples,⁶ then the mission of Jesus has an eye toward the transformation of marriages, families, commerce, and governments. The mission of Jesus has a sum total intent of transforming society as a whole, or as it is called in the Great Commission passage, *nations (ethnos)*. Believers are to affect nations! Those who advocate too narrow a view of Jesus' mission are forced to interpret *ethnos* to mean “people groups” so as to comport the passage to their viewpoint of non-involvement in civil government. But for those who hold a bigger view of Jesus' mission, while individual evangelism is inescapable, so is affecting nations for good.

Which parts of the Bible should not be preached about?

The pastor or teacher who holds to “evangelism, not politics” has a limited understanding of Jesus' mission, and to support this view must omit certain portions of the Bible, such as Genesis 9:5–6, John 19:11, Acts 25:11, Romans 13:1–7, or 1 Peter 2:13–14. Those passages all have to do with believers relating to government. Does one avoid teaching about Joseph's influence on Pharaoh's government, or Daniel's influence on Nebuchadnezzar's government? By way of extension, if one “just preaches the Gospel,” should one avoid teaching on marriage and family? What parts of the whole counsel of God should the Bible teacher omit? This leads to a huge incongruity in

light of 2 Timothy 3:16–17, which says, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching,*” and Acts 20:27, which says, “*declaring to you the whole purpose of God.*”

God leaves Christians here on earth both for evangelism and to do good for others.

God tends to leave His saints on earth after He saves them. After they are saved, what are believers to do? Should they only evangelize others for the remainder of their earthly life? What about Matthew 22:39: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*”? This command is listed six other times in the New Testament. Like the Great Commission command, this is a command from Jesus as well! The spirit of this command demands that we consider the following kinds of issues: making sure the law punishes thieves who rob my neighbors; working to create and enforce laws pertaining to internet privacy to protect my neighbors from hackers who would steal their credit card information; promoting policies that ensure that those who educate my neighbors’ children cannot teach them things that are evil. How could these endeavors that are completely compatible with the mandates of Scripture be accomplished if not by Christians involved in policy making? One could argue that there is a strong Biblical connection between loving our neighbor and being involved in civil government. Galatians 6:10 tells believers, “*So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.*” Ephesians 2:10 further cites societal responsibility when it says, “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*” In the words of Wayne Grudem, “Why should churches teach their people how to do good works in hospitals and in schools, and in businesses and in neighborhoods, but not in government?”⁷

God established both Church and State to restrain evil.

When a person comes to Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit causes internal regeneration that quells evil in that person’s heart (2 Corinthians 5:17). However, history and present observation indicate that not everyone comes to Christ, nor are converts completely and immediately sanctified. Therefore, in addition to the Church, God has instituted civil government to restrain evil by the use of force and punishment in a fallen world. Romans 13:4 is clear about this where Paul states, speaking of government, “*but if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.*” 1 Peter 2:13–14 states similarly, “*Submit yourselves ... to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers.*”⁸ God vests His authority in civil government (Romans 13:1) in order to restrain evil in a fallen world. Whereas the Church is God’s conduit of saving grace, the State is God’s conduit of restraining grace. Such a realization necessitates the believer’s involvement in civil government, since it is part of Jesus’ overall mission.

One other point is worthy of mention here. Christian isolationists often harbor ideological superiority: as if the authority of the Church is over the authority of the State. The Church is not over the State; the Church must submit to the State. The glaringly embarrassing American historical illustration of this is the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. The abolition of slavery came not from the institution of the Church via evangelism. It was the State that birthed a human being's freedom from another person's ownership. Sometimes the State restrains evil more effectively than the Church!

As another example, it was not the punctuality of church leaders that gave us the canonization of the New Testament. It wasn't until the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century demanded it from Eusebius that the Church got around to sewing the twenty-seven books together! Believers should respect the unique role of the State and not carry a condescending attitude toward it.

**Let us not shrink from involvement in civil government, lest we
end up inheriting a lawless country and lose our religious freedoms.**

Christians have positively influenced the State throughout history.

Let's look at three ways in which believers have influenced the State through history. Accounts are numerous and well documented by authors Schmidt⁹ and Colson¹⁰ in their wonderful works. Here is a summary:

THE DIGNITY OF MANKIND

The historic spread of Christian influence on the State has been responsible for many victories: the outlawing of infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (AD 374); prohibition of the burning alive of widows in India (1829); ending slavery in the British Empire (1840); the ending of binding of women's feet in China (1912); the outlawing of racial discrimination in America. These are but a few of the historic contributions of Christians engaged in politics.

THE CONSTITUTIONS OF MANKIND

Christians were influential in the writing of the Magna Carta in England in 1215, the Declaration of Independence in America in 1776, and the Constitution of the United States in 1787. These are the most important documents in

the history of governments. All these documents were significantly influenced by believers and are the basis not only of prosperous countries, but of the Christian mission movement worldwide. The advanced views of government spelled out in these documents have birthed individual freedoms, justice, freedom of religion, and the separation of Church and State.

THE EDUCATION OF MANKIND

Believers have greatly influenced the development of higher education in America. Of the 182 colleges and universities in America in 1932, 92 percent had been founded by Christian denominations. Such influence has led to the advancement of a society heretofore unknown in world history, a society that has accelerated the Great Commission to levels of accomplishment equal to that of the first century Church.

These are but a few illustrations of Christian influence on the State. Therefore, when a prominent Christian author reasons in 2000, “God does not call the church to influence the culture by promoting legislation and court rulings that advance a scriptural point of view,” and “Using temporal methods to promote legislative and judicial change ... is not our calling—and has no eternal value,”¹¹ one wonders how he can arrive at such a narrow understanding of the mission of Jesus. In his commentary on Matthew 5:13–16 dating back to 1985 this author said, “Christians can have a powerful influence on the welfare of the world.”¹² And therein he quotes Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said, “[What saved England was that] ... [t]he political situation was affected, and the great Acts of Parliament which were passed in the last century were mostly due to the fact that there were such large numbers of individual Christians found in the land.”¹³ Unfortunately, in the year 2000, this same writer wrote a book to attempt to influence pastors to avoid governmental involvement (see fn3). History, as well as the argument of Matthew 5:1–16, favors this author’s more Biblical 1985 position.

Doesn’t the Bible say that persecution is coming?

When studying eschatology, the study of future Biblical events, one could reason that since things are going to get worse in the end times (see Matthew 24:9–12; 21–22; 2 Timothy 3:1–5) we may as well not attempt to improve government today. The response is simple: in the meantime, the believer is to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–15); and we are to love our neighbor (Matthew 22:39), and do good works (Ephesians 2:10), in addition to evangelizing the lost (Matthew 5:16). One cannot disobey the clear commands of God in the here and now in lieu of end-time passages. A fatalistic view of the future of the world is no excuse for failure to act in the present moment. Scripture explicitly mentions that no one knows the exact time of Christ’s second coming (Matthew 24:36; 25:13), therefore believers should influence civil government for good as long as they are able.

Could political involvement distract believers from the main task of preaching the Gospel?

If indeed God has called the believer to be salt and light as a basis for evangelism, the question isn't whether political involvement by the Church will divert energy away from preaching the Gospel. The question is about how we can come to understand political involvement as a means of expanding opportunities for preaching the Gospel.

Believers should be involved in politics in ways similar to their involvement in making their marriage better, their family better, their business better, or their church better. Running for office and serving in civil government is no less spiritual than going into full-time ministry.

Having established that believers do indeed belong in government, let us now look at how you can be most effective in impacting the world through public service.

Notes

- 1 “*Gives light*” is a present active indicative verb.
- 2 In 1 Corinthians 9:22b the apostle Paul states, “*I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.*” This is an appropriate supporting passage for a Scriptural understanding of cultural involvement. Paul was willing to get involved in the lives, cultures, and professions of others (including the political arena, e.g., Philippians 1:13; 4:22; Acts 26:28ff.), without compromising Biblical truth, in order to evangelize the lost. How can today’s Church evangelize politicians if it is unwilling to connect with politicians?
- 3 John MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You: An Alternative to Political Activism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 11–12. It is worth noting MacArthur’s exposition of Romans 13:1–7 in 1994 wherein he speaks about ordination and moralization: “Human government is ordained by God for the benefit of society.... In order to promote and protect the good in society human government must punish the evil.” (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 9–16* [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 218, 225.) Implicit in his comments is his seeming admission of a broader role of the mission of Jesus (see Colossians 1:16). Unfortunately, his later contradictory thinking (“evangelism, not politics”) has influenced many.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 5 Many leading Christian thinkers believe one of the major reasons America has not gone the way of Europe is due to the presence and power of Christian radio.
- 6 It is noteworthy that Christ did not end His ministry commanding His followers to evangelize, but rather to make disciples.
- 7 Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 48. Please note that I am utilizing Dr. Grudem’s chapter outline (with its much-appreciated comprehensiveness) in this study with his permission.
- 8 The one exception to obedience to the authority of the State is when civil obedience would necessitate disobedience to God’s Word (see Exodus 1:17; Daniel 3:16–18; 6:7, 10; Acts 4:19).
- 9 Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).
- 10 Charles Colson, *God and Government: An Insider’s View on the Boundaries between Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). Previously published as *Kingdoms in Conflict*.
- 11 MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You*, 130, 15.
- 12 John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1–7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 243.
- 13 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 1:157, (as quoted in John MacArthur, *Why Government Can’t Save You*).