

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

The Futility of Political Change

Scripture: Matthew 5:13–16; Romans 13:1–7

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We need the timeless truths of God's Word to make sense of this crazy world. But Scripture not only explains what is really going on—it also fills us with hope as God works His sovereign plan to its ultimate, glorious conclusion. This blog series, first run in January 2016, is a timely reminder to that end. —ed.

Another election year is upon us, and with it, renewed hopes of favorable political change. While you don't have to look hard to find cynicism about government and the electoral process, people of all political stripes greet this political season with heightened interest and great expectations.

That includes the church, as more and more Christians look to social and political activism as the primary means for influencing society and “redeeming the culture.”

But are those legitimate priorities for believers? Have we been saved and sanctified to become culture warriors and moral lobbyists? Or have we been set aside for a higher purpose?

In his book *Why Government Can't Save You*, John MacArthur explains how the American church is particularly prone to political activism.

Over the past several centuries, people have mistakenly linked democracy and political freedom to Christianity. That's why many contemporary evangelicals believe the American Revolution was completely justified, both politically and scripturally. They follow the argumentation of the Declaration of Independence, which declares that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are divinely endowed rights. Therefore those believers say such rights are part of a Christian worldview, worth attaining and defending at all costs, including military insurrection at times. But such a position is contrary to the clear teachings and commands of Romans 13:1-7. So the United States was actually born out of a violation of New Testament principles, and any blessings that God has bestowed on America have come in spite of that disobedience by the Founding Fathers.

Also, many present-day Christian activists seem to be unaware of how much their methodology parallels that of liberal Christians at the turn of the twentieth century. Like those misguided idealists, contemporary evangelicals became enamored of temporal issues at the expense of eternal values. Evangelical activists, in essence, are simply preaching a politically conservative version of the old social gospel, emphasizing social and cultural concerns above spiritual ones. In that framework the government becomes more and more the earthly ally (if he can persuade it to support his special agenda) or enemy (if it stays opposed or unresponsive to his agenda) of the Christian. But 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. [1] John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 6-7.

Part of the fallout from the emphasis on political activism in the church is the denigration of God's

sovereignty. If we truly believe the Lord is the Author of history and that He is orchestrating all things according to His will, do we really need to throw so much of our time, energy, and resources into supporting candidates and ballot measures? Or is it that He has temporarily lost control, and we need to gain it back for Him?

As John MacArthur explains, that's simply not the work we've been set aside for:

We can't protect or expand the cause of Christ by human political and social activism, no matter how great or sincere the efforts. Ours is a spiritual battle against worldly ideologies and dogmas that are arrayed against God, and we achieve victory over them only with the weapon of Scripture. The apostle Paul writes: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NKJV).

As Paul's words declare, we must reject all that is ungodly and false and never compromise God's standards of righteousness. We can do that partly by desiring the improvement of society's moral standards and partly by approving of measures that would conform government more toward righteousness. We do grieve over the rampant indecency, vulgarity, unchastity, lack of courtesy and respect for others, deceitfulness, self-indulgent materialism, and violence that is corroding society. But in all our efforts to support what is good and wholesome, reject what is evil and corrupt, and make a profoundly positive impact on our culture, we must use God's methods and maintain scriptural priorities.

God simply is not calling us to wage a culture war that would seek to transform our countries into "Christian nations." To devote all, or even most, of our time, energy, money, and strategy to putting a façade of morality on the world or the appearance of "rightness" over our governmental and political institutions is to badly misunderstand our roles as Christians in a spiritually lost world. [2] *Why Government Can't Save You, 12-13*

We have been set apart in this world to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), not political movers and shakers. Investing our efforts into political battles turns our mission field into the enemy. We are not at war with the culture—we're at war with the sin that undergirds and drives it. And the goal of that battle is not gaining political influence, but rescuing souls from eternal damnation.

Christians need to get comfortable with the idea that God does not intend for our earthly lives to be *comfortable*. This world is not our home, and we shouldn't waste time striving to make it more accommodating to our standards and morality. Nor should we be surprised or shocked by how this sin-ruined world operates, or how its citizens behave. In fairness, how else should we expect unrepentant sinners to act?

The solution to the world's rampant depravity is not political change. No election ever brought about true repentance and faith; no legislation ever transformed an eternal soul. And all the efforts believers put into forced morality and behavior modification don't help matters—at best, they're training new Pharisees.

There is hope for this doomed world. And while the church plays a key part in bringing that hope to lost and desperate sinners, it has nothing to do with forced morality, behavior modification, or political

advocacy.

Next time we'll consider what hope this world has, and what part you and I play in bringing it to them.

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