

CHURCH AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT

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The Rise of Christendom

For its first three centuries, the Christian church existed as a barely tolerated, sometimes persecuted, and widely misunderstood minority religion within the Roman Empire. The Christian confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” was deemed to be a political threat by the Roman authorities. The Roman Empire tolerated religious diversity as long as it did not conflict with the interests of the state and devotion to the Emperor.

The conversion of Constantine changed the status of the Christian faith in the Empire. The Edict of Milan (AD 313) legalized Christianity and Christian bishops became imperial advisors. Decades later, Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica which made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Both Constantine and Theodosius viewed religion as a socio-political bond that promoted unity within the Empire. With the fall of Rome, Christian bishops became the *de facto* administrators of city-states throughout early medieval Europe.

The religious and political imagination of medieval Europe was informed by Augustine’s *City of God* (circa AD 425) which suggested that human society is comprised of the temporal cities of human history, epitomized by Rome, and the eternal City of God. The two cities are not separated, but integrated. Human cities will suffer inevitable decline. Only the City of God will ultimately prevail. As the nation-states of Europe began to rise from the collapse of the Roman Empire, the royal families of Europe ruled by divine right that was affirmed by the Christian Pope. The various Christian kingdoms became known as Christendom – a geopolitical marriage of the European nation-states and the Christian church.

The Rise of Secularism

The advent of Protestantism provoked a crisis in the political and religious establishments of Christendom. Europe became divided between Catholic and Protestant nations and religious conflict disintegrated into decades of warfare which ended with the Peace of Westphalia (1648). During this time European merchant ships were traveling the

oceans developing worldwide trade, establishing colonies in Africa and the Americas, and often transporting Christian missionaries. Many Europeans migrated to the American colonies in search of religious freedom. It is ironic that Europeans were fleeing Christendom so they could freely practice the Christian faith. Enlightenment thinkers of Europe began to imagine a society free of monarchical governments and the hierarchical church. This sentiment is expressed in words attributed to the French philosopher, Denis Diderot: "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest" (circa 1770). This thinking inspired the American and French revolutions. During this period a new concept emerged – the separation of church and state. In this view, the religious and political domains are distinct and separate. In the newly formed American nation, the first amendment protected religious practice from the encroachment of the new federal government (*The Constitution of the United States*, 1789). In revolutionary France, religious freedoms were contingent upon the interest of the state (*Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, 1789). The concept of separation of church and state has led to the rise of secularism which envisions a political society free of the constraints of public religious expression. In the secular state, public policy is debated and established within the precepts of the sciences and religious considerations are minimized.

Christians in the World Today

Presently, the people of God live and practice the Christian faith in diverse nation-states throughout the world. If we consider just the ten countries with the largest Christian populations we discover that this includes the Americas (USA, Brazil, Mexico), Europe (Germany), Asia (Russia, Philippines, and China) and Africa (Nigeria, Congo, and Ethiopia).¹ If we expand our demographic search to include countries and regions with smaller populations of Christians, then we discover that there are significant numbers of Christians living in regions whose culture is formed by other religions. In Buddhist regions of east Asia (Japan, Vietnam, the Koreas, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar) there are an estimated 30,000,000 Christians. In the Muslim regions of the Middle East and Northern Africa there are an estimated 13,000,000 Christians. In southern Asia, where Hinduism

¹ *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*. Pew Research Center, 2015. Internet: https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/christians/pf_15-04-02_projectionstable63/

(India) and Islam (Pakistan and Indonesia) are dominant there are an estimated 58 million Christians.²

The Church of God (Cleveland, TN) has a presence in 185 countries and territories of the world with almost 40,000 local congregations and 7.5 million members.³ Therefore, consideration of the interactions between the Christian church and the nation-states of the world must be global, and allow for regional contextualization. The relationship of Christian communities in intolerant nations will be profoundly different than the relationship of Christian communities in nations which tolerate religious freedom. Faithful Christians must always give priority of allegiance to the mission of the Kingdom of God in all political contexts.

The Christian church is the first-fruits of New Creation, a people born of the Holy Spirit and saved from the corruption of this present age. The church represents a new humanity freed from the bondage of sin and death. The church in this present age is to model a new social structure, “a new and living way,” inaugurated by the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:20; cf. Galatians 3:26-28). The Christian church includes, transcends, and transforms all human cultural, racial, and ethnic paradigms. The body of Christ is comprised of “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9; cf. Genesis 12:3; Acts 3:25; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 7:9).⁴ The Christian church has declared its sole allegiance to Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords; therefore, it transcends the diverse political borders and economic ideologies of the kingdoms of humanity. Christian believers live in monarchies, democracies, and totalitarian regimes with capitalist, socialist, and communist economic systems. In some regions of the world the Christian faith is tolerated, and in other regions of the world believers are persecuted and martyred. Even as the Church exists in this present age, the hope of all believers is for New Creation. The challenge for Christians in this present age is to negotiate the tensions of being in the

² *Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population*, Pew Research Center, 2011. Internet: <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>. Also: *Christianity in Indonesia*. <https://www.indonesiainvestments.com/culture/religion/christianity/item249>

³ Church of God World Missions. Internet: <https://cogwm.org/about/mission-stats/>

⁴ All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible* ®, Copyright © 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.

world, but not of the world. In other words, how might Christians be faithful to Jesus Christ while living in Babylon?

"My Kingdom is not of this world"

Pilate and Jesus stood before each other as representatives of two opposing kingdoms – Pilate representing the Roman Empire, and Jesus representing the kingdom of God. Jesus was charged with crimes against the Roman state (John 19:12). As Pilate interrogated him, Jesus declared, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 19:36). Since the fall of humanity, all the kingdoms of this world derive authority from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, knowledge without God and autonomy from God (Genesis 2:9; 3-17). The kingdoms of this world are perpetually tempted towards idolatry, with powerful humans as demi-gods who rule by virtue of power, violence, and wealth (Genesis 11:1-9). Throughout the world, battlefields are designated as sacred ground and warriors are memorialized. God has judged human civilization to be barbaric: "Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:15-18; cf. Isaiah 59:7-8).

The servants of Jesus cannot establish God's kingdom with acts of coercion or violence (Matthew 26:52-53). Jesus is king by virtue of his eternal and divine Sonship (Psalm 2:6-7; Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 11:27; 26:64; 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-22; Philippians 2:9-10; Colossians 2:10; 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 1:5). Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God with a call to repentance and a proclamation of "release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:18-19). Jesus' kingdom is characterized by "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). The kingdom of God is established by divine love expressed by the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Upon the cross, the divine-human Christ endured the totality of human violence against humanity, and against God. With his resurrection Jesus ensured the coming of "a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13; cf. Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1). With the Incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the kingdom of God

has invaded the present world. The Lord's Prayer expresses the heart of God, that God's "kingdom come" and God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). As the divine-human intercessor, Jesus prays for his disciples who are not of the world, but sent into the world (John 17:13-19). Christians are commissioned by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the priestly and prophetic people of God in this present age (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

Living in Babylon

Throughout the Biblical narrative Babylon represents the nations of this present age in opposition to the kingdom of God (Genesis 11:1-9; 1 Peter 5:13; Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh means that the Spirit is moving throughout all the cities, domains, and cultures of the world (Isaiah 11:9; 40:5; 52:10; Joel 2:28; Habakkuk 2:14). The creative-redemptive work of the Spirit means that the Spirit gives birth to the kingdom of God within the domain of Babylon. The presence of the Christian church throughout the world is the pledge of New Creation. The Holy Spirit works to promote human flourishing among all peoples, including those who are unaware of God's grace at work among them. Just as God causes the sun and rain to nurture the righteous and wicked alike, so too the Spirit of God moves within the darkness of all the nations of the world to plant seeds of human flourishing and redemption (Matthew 5:45; John 1:1-5; 1 John 2:8).⁵

The first humans – Adam and Eve – were created in the image of God with the divine charge to "rule ... over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28; cf. Genesis 2:15). Human government is ordained of God and all human rulers are servants of God (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:2; Isaiah 45:1; Romans 13:1, 6; Colossians 1:16; 1 Peter 2:13). National borders are established and governments rise and fall at God's decree (Deuteronomy 12:38; Job 12:23; Jeremiah 27:5-7; Daniel 4:17, 25; Acts 17:26). The purpose of government is to establish a civil order that reflects the righteousness and justice of God; and promotes the peace and flourishing of humanity. However, because of

⁵ Steven M. Studebaker, *A Pentecostal Political Theology for American Renewal: Spirit of the Kingdoms, Citizens of the Cities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5, 7, 141, 173, 203, 224.

the fallen state of humanity, no government in this present age can exemplify the Kingdom of God. Human governments resist the Holy Spirit, and human rulers refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5; cf. John 3:19; Acts 4:26; Revelation 17:14). Even the European nation-states of Christendom failed to rule according the royal law of love (James 2:8). The nations of the world have fallen in temptation to the idolatry, immorality, and greed of the great Babylonian whore (Revelation 14:8; 17:2; 18:3, 9). Therefore, national patriotism and allegiance to political parties should always be tempered by the Christian’s faithfulness to God’s kingdom.

Christians are God’s chosen people who are scattered as aliens throughout the territories of Babylon (1 Peter 1:1; cf. 1 Peter 2:11; James 1:1). Christians live as exiles in a foreign land. Each Christian community is a dependent colony of New Creation with primary citizenship established in the New Jerusalem (Philippians 3:20). The nations of the world will never be a Christian’s homeland because all faithful believers yearn for the city “whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10; cf. Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 11:16; 12:22, 28; Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10).

As strangers and aliens living in Babylon, Christians should “seek the welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7). Jesus said that his servants should “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17; cf. Matthew 22:21; Luke 20:25; Romans 13:7). Jesus was not suggesting that the Emperor and God were to be given equal devotion; he was not giving divine sanction to Rome; nor was he acknowledging Caesar’s claims of divinity. Jesus was instructing his disciples how to live as an oppressed minority in Babylon (cf. Matthew 5:38-48). As resident aliens, Christians should pay taxes, give due honor to government officials, pray for those in authority, and make every effort to live in peace with everyone (Romans 13:1-6; cf. 12:17-18; 1 Peter 2:11-17).

As people of New Creation, Christians are authorized to represent the Kingdom of God as “ambassadors of Christ” and “ministers of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). The message of the Kingdom of God may appear to be foolish and offensive, but Christians must eagerly, boldly, and faithfully proclaim the message of Jesus to the powers and authorities of this present world (Romans 1:14-16; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8). Christians should also seek to serve national and local governments as long as such service does not compromise their renewed conscience (Acts 24:16; Romans 12:2). Naaman, the

Syrian commander who suffered from leprosy, confessed allegiance to the God of Israel after being healed. As a servant of the Syrian king, he knew his presence would be required when the king worshipped in the Temple of Rimmon, the Syrian national god. Naaman suggested that his presence would be mere formality and asked for a pardon in the matter. The prophet Elisha reassured him with the words, “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:18-19). Christians should offer respect for the religious customs of fellow humans without compromising fidelity to Christ. Daniel maintained faithfulness to God and served Babylonian and Persian kings with excellence and wisdom (Daniel 1:8, 20; 2:48). Some first-century believers served the household of Caesar (Philippians 4:22). Christians who are privileged to serve in places of authority should seek to influence public policy so that the righteousness and justice of God’s kingdom might prevail in this present age, that those who are oppressed and disenfranchised might be protected, and the equal dignity of all humans will be esteemed from conception to natural death (Genesis 18:19; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 22:3; Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:31-40; Hebrews 13:1-6). Christians must at all times give priority of allegiance to the righteous Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:24, 33).

“We must obey God, rather than men.”

In this present age, human governments fall into idolatry and attempt to make religion a tool of the state. In secular governments, the well-being of the state is the highest good. The spirit of Babylon insists upon human autonomy from God, human achievement, and human deification (cf. Genesis 3:5; 11:1-9; Psalm 82:6; Isaiah 14:14; Ezekiel 28:2, 9; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 13:1-18). The self-deification of the state is exemplified in the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image which represented him as divine. All subjects of his empire were to worship the image. But three Hebrew men – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – refused to bow before the Babylonian idol. They served in King Nebuchadnezzar’s royal administration, but refused to deify him (Daniel 3:1-18). Likewise, when King Darius the Mede required absolute allegiance, Daniel refused to comply (Daniel 5:1-13). No human ruler is worthy of absolute allegiance.

Earlier in the biblical narrative, when the Pharaoh of Egypt ordered the execution of all Hebrew male infants, “the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them” (Exodus 1:17). During the days of the primitive church, the apostles

were forbidden to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. They declared, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). At Thessalonica, Christians were accused of acting “contrary to the decrees of Caesar” (Acts 17:7). Submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ compels believers to resist evil in the world (Romans 12:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 3 John 11).

The Kingdom of God is engaged in spiritual conflict with the powers and principalities of this present age (Ephesians 6:12). Even as Christians strive to be godly residents of the nations of the world, we are exhorted, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world,” and “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (1 John 2:15-17; cf. James 4:4). Jesus said, “because you are not of the world ... the world hates you” (John 15:19). The spirit of Babylon strives to “make war with the saints and to overcome them” (Revelation 13:7). Oppressive governments will persecute the disciples of Christ. Jesus declared, “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). In the face of persecution, Christians should be prepared to give a defense of the Gospel through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Mark 8:38; Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-19; Romans 1:16; 1 Peter 3:15).

Jesus has “disarmed the rulers and authorities” and “triumphed over them” by his death, resurrection, and ascension (Colossians 2:15). All human authorities are subject to the rule of Christ and when He returns in power and glory all the rulers of the earth will be judged and bow before Christ as King and Lord (Psalm 2:9; 9:19; 67:4; 82:6-8; 96:10; 110:6; Isaiah 2:4; 45:23-24; 60:12; Jeremiah 25:31; Ezekiel 39:21; Daniel 2:44; 4:34; Micah 4:3; Zechariah 14:9; Haggai 2:6-7; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 12:25-28; Revelation 6:12-17; 11:18; 14:8; 17:14; 18:2).

Summary

The purpose of government is to establish a civil order that reflects the righteousness and justice of God; and promotes the peace and flourishing of humanity. The Christian church includes, transcends, and transforms all human cultural, racial, and ethnic paradigms. Christian believers live in monarchies, democracies, and totalitarian regimes with capitalist, socialist, and communist economic systems. National patriotism and allegiance to political parties should always be tempered by the Christian’s faithfulness to God’s kingdom.

Resources for Further Study

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