

Walking with Jesus Through Sinai:
 Seeking Moral Clarity in an Age of Chaos with the 10 Commandments
 CPC Adult Sunday Studies Spring 2025
 18 - Fifth Commandment, part 4

On Institutional and Individual Engagement with Politics

Review - Last week, we focused on the institutional purposes of the church and the state, both set up by God.

Exodus 20:12 - "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

Taking this commandment to apply to all authorities that God has placed in our life, we need to be clear about the nature of the state institution. For what purpose did God give it? What is it meant to accomplish (and not)? [On the nature of the institution of the church, see our "What We Believe" class #18-20] We'll look at one example of Christian nationalism, and then examine how individual Christians should engage in politics.

On Christian Nationalism

Contemporary American Version

From Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (2022)

- **Definition:** "Christian nationalism is a totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself both earthly and heavenly good in Christ." (9)
- "**The Gospel** does not supersede, abrogate, eliminate, or fundamentally alter generic nationalism; it assumes and completes it." (11)
- "A nation has no power in itself to bring anyone **internally** to true faith—to realize heavenly good in individuals. But nations have the power to ensure that **outwardly** the things of salvation—the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments—are available to all and that people are **encouraged, even culturally expected**, to partake and be saved unto eternal life." (15)

- **Conceptual foundation** - "The formation of nations is not a product of the fall; it is natural to man as man. But the evil in nations and caused by nations is the *abuse* of what is intended for man's good. Neither is civil government introduced by the fall, for civil government would have been necessary for unfallen people to coordinate action for the common good. The fall required civil government to be *augmented* to restrain sin, though it still retained its same original principles and end. . . . The **instinct to live within one's 'tribe' or one's own people** is neither a product of the fall nor extinguished by grace; rather, it is natural and good. . . . one *ought* to prefer and to love more those who are more similar to him, and much good would result in the world if we all preferred our own and minded our own business." (22-25)

Biblical Response to Christian Nationalism

1. *Recognize the good of what they're after* - they want more Christians to act with conviction and to propagate what is true and good, and they want America to have more Christians and be more friendly to Christian ethics. He rightly wants Christianity to be culturally plausible, which is a worthy apologetic goal. Note DeYoung's "speech."
2. *Question the assumptions* - Wolfe places a huge amount of conceptual weight upon his claim that the state would have existed pre-fall *and* it is a God-given desire to prefer one's own "tribe." The biblical evidence for either point is either totally lacking or in direct opposition.
 1. For example, Jesus condemns those who merely love those who love them in return, and calls us to imitate him as he loves his enemies.
 2. *Gal. 3.28 reads, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Cf. *Eph. 2.11-22*) Wolfe doesn't seem to imagine that we would experience this reality—which is so central to the gospel—across our "tribes." How small a view of Christ we would experience if we only ever worshipped with people in our "tribe"! And what would this mean for cross-cultural or global missions?
 3. Who is our "tribe"? He seems to envision rural homogenous communities as the only ones able to fulfill this vision of the Christian nation. The urban reality of many "tribes" and cultures seems almost ignored, let alone the vision of the multi-ethnic church throughout the New

Testament. His vision would take us back to “separate but equal” communities, which aren’t equal at all and surely aren’t God-given.

3. *Exalt the Church* - Biblically speaking, there is no such thing as a civic “Christian nation” since the church alone is called a “holy nation” (1Peter 2), and the church alone is tasked with preaching the gospel and embodying the kingdom of God where Jesus reigns. He envisions the church as little more than a help along the way so that the state can embody the full Christian life.
4. *Humble the State* - The state is not called in Scripture to image the heavenly city, the church is. Far too much hope is placed in the state, at a time when this vision is least likely to be accomplished, so the effect is likely to be divisions and schisms rather than practical benefits.
5. *Reject the ethos* - DeYoung correctly writes, “Biblical instincts are better than nationalist ones, and the ethos of the Christian Nationalism project fails the biblical smell test. Will the person who goes all in on this book—the person who says “yes” to every rant, the person who feels drawn to the vision of ethnic separation, the person who is just biding his time until the Christian prince arrives and the revolution is ready to start—be apt to grow in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13)? Will he be led to rejoice insofar as he shares in Christ’s sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13)? And if the end of things is at hand, will he be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of his prayers (1 Pet. 4:7)? Or will this book help us return reviling for reviling (1 Pet. 2:23)?”

For a fuller review and critique of Wolfe’s book, see Kevin DeYoung’s article on the Gospel Coalition site, “The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism,” who concludes, “the message—that ethnicities shouldn’t mix, that heretics can be killed, that violent revolution is already justified, and that what our nation needs is a charismatic Caesar-like leader to raise our consciousness and galvanize the will of the people—may bear resemblance to certain blood-and-soil nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, but it’s **not a nationalism that honors and represents the name of Christ.**”

On Individual Christians' Engagement with the State

- **The duty of the individual Christian TO the state - WCF 23.4** - "It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates, to honor their persons, to pay them tribute or other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. **Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void** the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them..." (1 Tim 2:1-3; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Matt 22:21; Rom 13:6-7; Rom 13:5; Titus 3:1). Notice this is largely the same as an "inferiors" duty to honor their "superiors."

- **The duty of the individual Christian IN the state - WCF 23.3** - "... as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the **full, free, and unquestioned liberty** of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. . . . It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name **of all their people**, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, **either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity**, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever." (2 Chr 26:18; Matt 18:17; Matt 16:19; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 4:1-2; Rom 10:15; Heb 5:4; John 18:36; Acts 5:29; Eph 4:11-12; Isa 49:23; Rom 13:1-6; Ps 105:15; Rom 13:4; 1 Tim 2:2)
 - So there is a clear purpose for the state, which includes provision for and protection of religious liberty for all people. This section was expanded in America at the 1729 Adopting Act. The original Westminster of the 1630's didn't include such expansive religious liberty.

Practical Tips on How to Engage Politically

1. *Remember the difference between the Church and State.* They simply have different purposes and callings, which should change our goals for them.
 1. In general, at least in America, we need a higher calling and passion for the Church, and lower ones for the State. Because American Christians are used to having political power and being in the majority, we have too high of hopes in politics.

2. *Institutional Separation does NOT mean we shouldn't vote from our faith*
 1. It is impossible for a Christian to “leave their faith outside the voting booth.” That would be like trying to cut off a limb! Everything is meant for Christ. We simply have to discern the God-given purpose of politics and political actors, which are different from the purposes of the church.
 2. The State is called to be “denominationally neutral” but being “secular” is impossible if it means that it does not have values or idols. Everyone worships something, and our idols motivate our lives, including political views. God is meant to be over all our lives, so we should still be motivated by our faith, as well as the institutional purposes. This also implies that we can never justify acting in an “unChristian” way for a Christian end—the Christian can never act as if the ends justify the means.

3. *Christianity is not a tribe or a civilization to defend.* There are many non-Christian ways in which Christians now engage in tribalism and virtue-signaling that undermine Christian integrity. In our sound-bite culture, we often just shame and demonize the other side in order to show to those in our “tribe” that we’re on the right side.
 1. We don’t promote Christian virtues like humility, love, justice, and peace simply because we think they’re “effective” or “practical” and can change when the need arises; rather, we **follow our Crucified Savior** in those virtues no matter what. An individual Christian acting in a political calling uses weapons that the Church would not use (for example, military weapons), but not in order to bring the kingdom of God, and certainly not in a way that justifies unChristian character.
 2. This is partly why uniting Christianity with any political party does damage to the Christian witness. If you can’t disagree with any parts of your political party or favorite candidate, you’re not listening with biblical ears. **There shouldn’t be a “Christian vote”!** Scripture speaks to all matters of life and faith, yes; but it does not speak to all the specifics that we need. Scripture is clear that we should care for the poor and the foreigner, but it doesn’t tell us which economic or foreign policy will do that better than the other. What is more, to pretend to be a Christian in order to appeal to Christian voters is one of the more disgusting facets of American politics.

4. *Christians are not to be driven by fear.*

1. Fear is a very powerful motivator, but it is not a Christian one. Most often, fear is simply a fear of people who are different from us or will lead us to change. A Christian response to change is to humbly receive what the other is proposing, and to treat them with decency and respect. Especially when it comes to **immigration**, a Christian may have good reasons to protect the borders of a country, but not out of malice, rage, fear, or lack of concern for persons in danger. We should weep with those who weep, regardless of nationality.
1. Note also that we should not expect the state to favor “christian nations” over others, why? Because that would give the state the authority to decide who is a Christian (!), which is precisely the power of the keys that Jesus gave the church.

5. *Beware of false equivalence* - just because we can’t say with certainty “thus says the Lord” does not mean that two issues or candidates are equal, or that simply listening to two sides equally is a way to arrive at an “objectively neutral” stance. For example, in 1930’s Germany, it would not have been “neutral” or unbiased to treat a Nazi position with the same equanimity as an opposing party, regardless of its popularity. This is a difficult realization in a country with two dominant parties because it makes it appear as if there are two sides to every issue and that the “objective” or right approach is somewhere in the middle. Sometimes that’s true, and sometimes it’s not. As a Christian, we ought to be more radical than either party on some issues, more moderate on others, etc.

1. **Beware of Social Media Manipulation** - Christians need to be aware that social media is meant to attract the most extreme opinions and is monetized for click-bait. **That’s not how truth gets disseminated.** Try to learn what silo you are most susceptible to living in, and take steps to get out of it. In other words, don’t believe the hype you find on social media or other news sources, and have a healthy skepticism of what is popular or easily believed in our culture!