

We are considering the relationship between religion and politics. Does the Bible offer guidance on the relationship between church and state? Attitudes toward politics these days seem to vacillate between two opposing opinions. The first approach could be called a desire for dominance. This is the view that because Christianity has been the dominant religion in America, God has blessed our nation. Therefore, if we can get people of faith in positions of power all will be well. For most of our nation's history, Christian values have closely approximated the values held by our culture. That is changing fast.

The other attitude toward politics is despair. People are discouraged by the erosion of cultural values and feel like it's only getting worse. We can't change anything anyway so why vote? That's why I have titled this brief series, "De-voted."

Of course those are not the only two options. A third option - active participation in our devotion to Christ and His kingdom. Last week we saw that Jesus was passionately preoccupied with the priority of the kingdom of God over the kingdom of man. He showed respect for the governing authorities but made it clear that we are to "seek first the Kingdom of God." Devoting ourselves to the Kingdom of God is the best thing we can do for the kingdoms of men. The well-being of this nation does not rest upon the election of a godly president as much as it does the godly testimony of kingdom-minded people. A nation can overcome the failure of a weak president. It is much harder to overcome the failure of a weak church. So my campaign slogan is "Make the church great again." The simple truth is that if the church in America is great then America will be great.

Greatness was on the mind of Jesus' disciples before He left this earth. They asked, "Are you now going to restore the Kingdom?" These were men who were conflicted about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. They longed for a kingdom where there would be no injustice, where the innocent and vulnerable would be protected, where the hungry would find food and the captives would be set free. But they were often confused about how that kingdom would come. They wanted a king, a powerful political king, to overthrow the Roman authorities and demonstrate His rule on earth. They sometimes saw Jesus not only as king but as their ticket to personal greatness. They were conflicted not just about what the kingdom was but in the methodology as to how the kingdom would come.

They still had not gotten the meaning of a baby born in a barn, divinity in diapers, in a tiny town called Bethlehem, by means of a pregnant, unmarried teenager who was betrothed to a poor, common laborer. The powerful had no interest in Jesus (until He threatened their power). It was the outcasts of society who chose to

follow Him. God's methodology is as surprising as it is consistent; He chooses the ordinary, the weak, the flawed and forgotten to be His ambassadors. It's a lesson Chuck Colson learned not in the White House but in prison.

"When I was 39, the President of the United States asked me to serve as his special counsel. It was one of the most powerful positions in the world. Every day, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger walked into our briefing sessions with a worried look on his face and said, 'The decision we are going to make today will change the future course of human history.' I now realize we never changed anything. We dealt with Congress and newspapers but we didn't change how people lived. It was in prison, where I served time for my involvement in the Watergate conspiracy that I learned about real power."

So Jesus surprised the disciples with His strategy for changing the world. He said to them, "YOU shall be my witnesses." They would be His method, ordinary men. Not professors and priests and politicians. Jesus is building His church to be a sign and a foretaste of the Kingdom that is coming. His Kingdom will not expand through imperialism or military might but through a community of men and women He calls "the church." So the question is not how can we make America great again, but how can we make the church great again? 1 Pe. 2:9-17

1. A great church is a unified church. The people of God have a common calling...vv. 9-10. What do these terms have in common? They are collective nouns. That means I am a part of a whole. I am one of the living stones Peter refers to that makes up the spiritual house God is constructing. It is a challenge to maintain the "unity of the Spirit" while living in a selfie kingdom where everyone has their own agenda. The early church was effective in part because they rejected extreme individualism that is a hallmark of our nation.

"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." Acts 4:32-35.

God created a new community, through whom He seeks to accomplish the same purposes He formerly sought to achieve through Israel. God's purpose for Israel

was that she be a nation of priests (Exod. 19:6), who would stand between God and the rest of humanity, representing people before God. Israel failed.

So Jesus established the church, "the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." (Eph. 3:9-10). Our common calling is to be a royal priesthood proclaiming the excellencies of Christ. The mission of the church is, in some ways, the same as Israel's - to be the instrument through which the light of God reaches individuals who still sit in spiritual darkness.

2. A great church resists cultural conformity...v. 11. We are resident aliens (sojourners and exiles). We don't take our cues on how to behave in this world from the kings of this world but from the King who is coming. Jeremiah instructed the exiles in Babylon. Peter provides instruction for those of us living here in Suburblyon. We are to "abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul." Most lives are not destroyed by evil governments or corrupt politicians but by our own evil thoughts and corrupt desires.

"A Christianity constantly looking for political answers to moral and spiritual problems gives believers an excuse to blame other people when they should be looking in the mirror." (J. D. Vance, *NY Times Sunday Review*, "The Bad Faith of the White Working Class.") When we do look in the mirror we discover that our churches are becoming more and more conformed to six guiding principles that Americans now pledge allegiance to:

1. To find yourself, look within yourself.
(To find yourself, discover the truth outside yourself in Jesus.)
2. Never criticize someone else's life choices.
(Loving others does not always mean staying silent.)
3. To be fulfilled in life, pursue the things you desire most.
(Joy is found not in pursuing our own desires but in giving of ourselves to bless others.)
4. Enjoying yourself is the highest goal in life.
(The highest goal of life is giving glory to God.)

5. People can believe whatever they want as long as long as they don't hurt anyone.

(God gives people the freedom to believe whatever they want, but those beliefs always affect society.)

6. Any sexual expression between two consenting adults is fine.
(God designed boundaries for sex and sexuality in order for humans to flourish.)

3. A great church practices "good deeds"...v. 12. The ultimate goal of the church is to live in such a way that God's wisdom (and all the other aspects of his glory) will be displayed to the world and to and to spiritual forces in heavenly places. Eph. 3:10. The church's job is to live so that people can see that God is real. What does that life look like? And the answer again and again in the NT is that it looks like *good deeds*.

Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your *good deeds* and give glory to your Father in heaven." Are there any deeds that you have planned into your life which you think it would be reasonable for people to look at and then conclude that because of your deeds God deserves their praise? According to Jesus the good deeds of his disciples are the window in this world through which people come to see and adore the glory of God.

God saved us to do good deeds. Ephesians 2:8-10.

In Titus 2:14 Paul teaches that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for *good deeds*." How could he have put it any stronger? Jesus Christ died to make us "zealous for good deeds."

After the Bolshevik Revolution the Soviet government targeted the church to render it impotent. But they did so in a way that you might not think. They allowed Christians to continue to attend Sunday services but they prohibited the church from serving the poor and reaching out to the needy. The government took over all those functions. They knew the church would not exist if it could not serve.

We are not called to be a NATO church - No action, talk only.

4. A great church respects the governing authorities...vv. 13-17. Because our kingdom is not of this world, no one owns us. However, both Peter and Paul teach that God has so ordered the universe that every one of us is to be under someone's

authority. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Ro. 13:1-2

So, pledge allegiance to the flag but our loyalty is to Jesus Christ first.

How can we make the church great again? The word "great" can mean large or it can mean important. The church does not have to be large to be important. The nature of yeast is such that once the process of leavening begins, it is impossible to stop. Jesus told a parable about the kingdom of God in Mt. 13:33. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." Jesus was implying that those who profess to belong to the kingdom would grow in numbers and nothing would be able to stop their advance. The word "great" is often confused with the word "famous." Our calling is not to make the church dominant or famous. Our calling is to plant the seed of the gospel within society and let it grow.

In the 1830's a French statesman visited America to study the implications of democracy upon the American people. When he finally wrote down his observations, Alexis de Tocqueville said,

"I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers – and it was not there . . . in her fertile fields and boundless forests and it was not there . . . in her rich mines and her vast world commerce – and it was not there . . . in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution – and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

— **Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America**

Let's do everything in our power to make the church great. That's the only way to make America, or any nation, great.