Walk *this* Way

Political Engagement *for* Bible-Believing Christians

Jeff Samelson

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★ ★ ★ INTRODUCTION ★ ★ ★

In the Beginning

How blessed is the man
who does not walk in the advice of the wicked,
who does not stand on the path with sinners,
and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers.
But his delight is in the teaching of the LORD,
and on his teaching he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted beside streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season,
and its leaves do not wither.
Everything he does prospers.
Not so the wicked!
No, they are like the chaff which the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
Yes, the LORD *approves of the way of the righteous,*
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)

Vignette 1: Christians Stay Away from Politics?

"WHAT'S GOT YOU so worried and upset?"

John hadn't thought it showed, but his wife knew his face and his feelings, even when he'd only just come through the door. And he understood there was no point trying to hide anything from Mary.

"Well, Thomas at the bakery just told me that they're going to raise our taxes again, and not just a little. He learns a lot from his suppliers and his customers, so he's rarely wrong about these things. I'm afraid. I'm not sure

that we can afford it—our finances are already tight and our profits are small. Giving more to the taxman might just put our business under. How would we live if that happened? I'm wondering if there's something I should do. I just don't know. Maybe I should tell them how these new taxes will hurt people like us."

"No, John, put those thoughts out of your head." Mary was quick with her reply. "There's nothing for you to do with things like this. It's politics, and Christians stay away from that stuff. Just trust God to take care of everything—he always does—and leave politics to the people who don't trust him."

Her mother, who lived with them, spoke before John had a chance to respond. "But Mary, as much as you might want to stay away from politics, politics doesn't stay away from you or any of us, Christian or not. And the Bible doesn't say we just have to sit back and take whatever the government does to us without saying a word to anyone—but it does tell us about a lot of believers who weren't afraid to speak up, even to kings, when things weren't right. And threatening your ability to support your family with too-heavy taxes isn't right."

She turned to her son-in-law. "So, John, whom do you plan to talk to? Do you think you can do something that'll make a difference?"

His shoulders sagged, matching the worry on his face. "I don't know, and I don't know. There are things I could do, but I'm not sure what might work and what might get me in trouble. Politics is just so … different that I don't even know where to start. I'm not sure what is right for me as a Christian in this world. What am I supposed to do?"

Vignette 2: Lost Identity

The Sunday morning service had just let out. Mark looked at his watch as he started home and noticed it wasn't morning anymore—the service went long again. But the pastor had preached a great sermon and it was always good catching up with fellow members after church. Except, these days, for Paul. Mark was glad he'd managed to work his way to the door without getting cornered.

"Hey, Mark, wait up!"

He made a mental note to remember not to count his chickens before they hatched. "Hey, Paul, what's up?"

"Oh, I'm glad I was able to catch you. I was wanting to talk to you—not sure how you managed to get past without me noticing!" There was

real wonder in Paul's voice, and Mark smiled internally to think how it was a blessing that this beloved brother in Christ didn't understand how he'd been making people feel recently.

"Oh, I'm part ninja on my mother's side, didn't you know?" He wasn't sure if Paul realized he was kidding, so, with mild dread, he added, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Yeah, did you watch those videos I sent you? I hope you shared them with your friends and family, too. It's really important that as many people as possible learn the truth about what's really going on and about who's really behind these attacks on our way of life and these lies they're telling about ...." Mark tuned out for a moment—he'd heard this all many times before—and re-engaged with Paul's speech just in time to hear, "We Christians have to stick together and support him. It's not just right, it's not just smart, it's not just patriotic, it's what's necessary to protect the church and all of Christ's people in our country—and to stand as an example for believers elsewhere, don't you think?"

Mark hadn't watched or shared the videos. But, as a friend and fellow church member, he knew it was time to try again to convince Paul to take a step back, tone things down, and just plain think about all this differently.

"No, Paul, I *don't* think so." He paused a moment to let that sink in, and he saw surprise and perhaps a bit of anger on his friend's face. "But I'm not going to talk about what I'm convinced of and whom I do and don't support or think other should. Not today."

"I want to talk about you, Paul. You're my brother in Christ and I love you—that won't change. But *you* have changed, and it's not a good change. It's good that you care about what happens in our country and there's nothing wrong with being into politics. But you've lost yourself and lost sight of what it means to be both a Christian and a citizen of our country, which I also love."

"Paul, I remember how a few years ago you told me that you were disturbed by the things this guy did and said, but you were going to vote for him despite that because he was the lesser of two evils and you didn't see a better option. You're not telling me he's changed at all, but now you defend everything he does or says as if no Christian could ever find anything to criticize—and therefore no one who criticizes him can be a Christian. And you proselytize more for him and his politics than you ever did for Jesus and the gospel."

"You've lost yourself, Paul. I won't pretend to know why or how, but you're not thinking like a child of God; you're acting like someone who

lives only for this world. It's not just the how and the what of the way you argue politics. You're losing your identity. I'm not saying you can't be a Christian and still support him. I'm saying that the way you are when you're supporting him isn't very Christian."

Vignette 3: Be Afraid or Engage?

"Hey, Jo, it's good to see you! How are you feeling these days?"

"Oh, Pastor, it's not too bad. I'd feel better if I were younger, but that's not an option!" She smiled as she let Pastor Lee into her apartment at the assisted living complex. He came to see her every month. This started after her arthritis got so bad she couldn't make it to church anymore, and his visit was something she always looked forward to—for the company, naturally, but especially because of the comfort he gave her with the gospel.

After some more small talk—and asking her to turn off the cable news channel, which she didn't even seem to realize she had on—he led her through a devotion, gave her the Lord's Supper, and prayed with her. As he started to put his things together, Jo stopped him with a question, something that had been on her mind for weeks. "Pastor, is this the end times?"

"That's a ... big question. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I watch the news and my friends send me all sorts of things on email and, believe it or not, on social media, and the politics and everything just all seem so bad now, not like when I was younger—even when our boys were off at war. This culture has just gotten so ..., well, there's evil everywhere I look, and instead of stopping it the government seems to be encouraging it and making it worse. My country doesn't seem to be my country anymore, and I'm not sure it's going to last much longer. And things don't look any better anywhere else in the world."

"So sometimes I feel afraid of what might be coming next and other times I just get sad about it all. And then I think that I'm ready to die and go to heaven. But then I think that maybe I won't even have to wait that long, that maybe all this trouble and evil we're seeing is what Jesus and the Apostles told us to look out for as the signs of the end. And that's scary—it keeps me up at night sometimes."

Pastor Lee smiled. "Jo, you don't need to be scared in scary times. Jesus promised to be with his people to the very end, and at the end, you

and all believers will be with him in paradise. Hold onto that truth when things that are happening get you worried."

"You're not alone, though, Jo. Lots of people are freaking out about our politics right now. Part of the problem is that there is so much more news available now, which means more bad news, too. And the internet amplifies all sorts of stuff that's not even true, that's not really important, or just isn't healthy to be thinking about. But you have an advantage as a *Christian*—all sorts of advantages, really. It's not just that the Lord of the universe claims you as his own, it's also the many blessings he gives you and other believers, things that can make a difference not just in how you react to politics but also in how you're able to engage with politics. There are valuable things Christians like you can do—things that matter."

"Really, Pastor? Like what? What can I do?" Jo was a little skeptical.

"Well, the first one that comes to mind is the thing I'm kind of jealous of you about, Jo—you have all sorts of time to pray. Prayer isn't just for church stuff or personal stuff—it's for anything that's on your heart or mind, and if that's politics, then pray about that! Lots of believers forget that they can bring the Almighty to their nation's issues and problems by bringing their nation's issues and problems to the Almighty!"

"And while I imagine you're not feeling spry enough to run for office, if you decide to get involved in politics at any level or in any way short of that, you have advantages. You are a Christian citizen of our country, and you can bring to that work all the blessings that you enjoy as a child of God in every other area of your life: his wisdom and guidance, your purpose, your perspective, your knowledge of human nature, and so many other things. Following Jesus and being involved with politics may feel like trying to knit with both your hands tied behind your back, but it's not—you're actually in a better position because you belong to Christ."

Beginnings

The three vignettes above illustrate some situations in which politics and the lives of individual Christians intersect and raise questions or cause conflicts. Chances are good that there's something in there that you have experienced or can at least relate to in some way. Indeed, believers in pre-modern times or places could probably even find something familiar in Vignette 1—taxes have been an unwelcome fact of life about as long as there have been governments to collect and spend them.

What is common to each of those vignettes is a problem with knowing how to manage the intersection of politics with the individual Christian's life, or at least an uncertainty in doing so. Even under the most totalitarian governments there is room for action, speech, or at least holding opinions, and questions like "What should I as a disciple of Christ do?" and "What can I do that will not get me in trouble or make life uncomfortable?" won't always be answered the same way.

That's the case under monarchies and dictatorships. The situation that is more common to believers in the English-speaking world presents even more difficulty (or at least the prospect of it) for those who take notice of politics, think about it, and want to know what's appropriate for them to do. Democracies—even nations that are only partially democratic—give some level of authority to their citizens and offer them a wide range of options for engaging with the process of governing. This means that Christian citizens have what may seem like an overabundance of choices to make about their involvement or non-involvement with politics, but before making any decisions they first need to understand what is and is not appropriate for them as God's people. Unfortunately, there is not a consensus among Christians or their pastors and teachers on this matter—some say this, some say that, some say still other things—and this can cause confusion, frustration, hard feelings, spiritual harm, political mistakes, and, ultimately, both apathy and despair.

The only way for a believing citizen to gain a proper understanding and confidence in his or her political choices is the one described in and prescribed by Psalm 1, which we began with above. To enjoy, as citizens of their nations, the same kind of blessedness that is theirs in other areas of their lives, believers will delight in the teaching of the Lord—and avoid the advice of the wicked and the company of mockers. They will take care to listen to everything God has to say, which means consulting, hearing, reading, and trusting his Word, the Scriptures.

This book is intended to serve that purpose for Bible-believing Christians of all backgrounds and all parties. As a solid, practical, trustworthy, and scripturally rich guide, it will help them see their place in the world and how to deal with the politics of the places where they live—to avoid problems, dilemmas, and frustrations when they can and to handle those that can't be avoided in the most God-pleasing and productive way possible.

It's an admittedly ambitious undertaking. So where do we start?

With remembering that, in the beginning, there were no problems with politics.

In the beginning there was God. Then God made the world, and when he did that he did not simply set the earth spinning and leave it alone. He created perfection and wonder, awesome simplicity and complex beauty, teeming oceans and verdant landscapes, plants and animals, and man and woman.[1]

The LORD had a perfect plan for his perfect people in his perfect world. Without sin, there would have been peace and harmony for humanity forever—uninterrupted fellowship with God and untroubled relationships for everyone at every level of interaction and in every situation.

You and I never had a chance to know that world. Once sin entered in, the perfection was lost. People no longer trusted God as they should and were no longer trustworthy as they could have been. We all feel the effects of this corruption; no one is exempt from the experience. Our dealings with other people demonstrate the frailty and failings of human nature—our own and theirs—all while making us long for the perfect world that was lost to us.

Politics

Few areas of life show this truth better than politics. Christians and non-Christians alike engage with politics in the hopes of getting, knowing, experiencing, or even *being* something better—perhaps selfishly, only for themselves or their family, or, more generously, for their group, community, or nation. Naturally, not everyone has the same ideas of what "better" is and not everyone agrees about who should have it.

Which leads to conflict, between individuals, groups, nations and cultures, with each side telling the other "We're right and you're wrong!" History and experience show that such friction can have results much worse than disagreement—things like intolerance, bigotry, hatred, oppression, persecution, lawlessness, violence, rebellion, and war.

Even when political conflicts are not particularly heated, they are not easily resolved, because people's political positions are quite often rooted not so much in their ideas as in their identities: they think X, say Y, and do Z because that's what people like them and on their side think, say, and do—and most of the time they're not even conscious of why. Frequently persuasion is not even attempted, even when it's possible, be-

1. Genesis 1 and 2.

cause the appeal to identity is so much more natural (even when it's ineffective). Political conflicts are typically not so much resolved as they are suppressed or stifled: the side with greater power "wins" and the losing side, at least for a time, is no longer able to advance its ideas, preferences, or policies.

For Christians things are both simpler and more complex. They are simpler in that with every new issue or generation they don't have to search out new truths about human nature and behavior or decide on new standards of right and wrong. They are more complex in that they are always needing to hold onto and apply these objective truths and enduring standards, the challenges are ever-changing, and the variety of vexing situations that sin incites is endless. This is all while believer must constantly resist self-serving subjectivity and refrain from the moral flexibility which would allow them to "solve" problems by adjusting or simply abandoning their convictions.

Sadly, human sinfulness and imperfection are not just things that unbelievers have to deal with; they are complicating factors also within the church and among Christians. This is the case not just where things like theology, traditions, and congregational practices are concerned, but also in how politics is viewed and what is taught or understood about how it should be approached—and whether the church or Christians should have anything to do with it at all.

"Politics" as a term encompasses a wide range of meanings and applications, but here we might define it *generally* as **the activities which determine how a nation, people, or area is governed** and more *specifically* as **the actions, processes, and interactions that decide who gets the power to make those determinations.** Even more *succinctly* we might say that politics is **the business of running the state**—whether that "state" is a country, empire, city, tribe, or any other kind of territory or grouping of people.[2]

Since just about every Christian on earth lives and just about every church[3] exists in a place governed by a state of some sort, politics is a real thing that believers will encounter and, for the most part, cannot escape. It should also not be ignored, because Jesus called his disciples to engage

2. For our purposes here, "state" will refer to the political entity that is a nation or its government, or of smaller subdivisions of a nation. "State" as a constituent part of a federal government, as in the "United States of America", is avoided for the sake of clarity.
3. Allowing for the possibility that, at any given time, there might be Christians living somewhere so remote or ungovernable that they are effectively stateless and ungoverned.

with the world they live in, not to be indifferent to it, isolate from it, or abandon it to evil.

Unfortunately, even when Christians have not ignored politics, they have often had and still have attitudes toward it and ways of engaging with it that have been unhelpful, unwise, or just plain wrong. This is perhaps not surprising, but it is certainly not ideal or what God wants for his people.

Unwise Attitudes

It is possible that you are unconvinced that this is the case, or don't see that there's a problem, at least not today, with how Christians deal with politics. A quick survey of some of the more common flawed or ill-informed ideas and approaches should therefore be helpful. Briefly stated, these are some of the problematic views that believers have espoused or been guided by over the centuries or in the present:

- "The way things were in one place at one time is the way they should always be." This could show itself in a conviction that the proper relationship between the church and the state was what existed in Europe at some particular point in the Middle Ages or after the Reformation, or that the influence believers had on their culture as a whole and on government in particular at some more recent time, like 75 or 100 years ago, is the ideal that needs to be re-established. These blinkered perspectives typically ignore inconvenient truths or uncomfortable historical data that argue against their premises. Those who hold these views have also sometimes shown themselves willing to achieve their goals by whatever illiberal means they deem necessary.
- "Things are always getting better, so what we have right now is the best it's ever been. Let's just have more of the same!" This view not only ignores the past and its lessons but also forgets humanity's imperfections and imperfectability in the present. This is an even more narrow-minded vision; it has difficulty appreciating what might be at stake for Christians and the church in a particular political conflict. Its disinterest in history means its adherents don't know what good things might have been lost or if changes were incremental or abrupt, which limits their understanding of what might be coming or be possible in the future.

- "It may not be perfect, but the way things have been and are right now is what we're used to. Just don't change anything and we won't complain." This shows what is likely an unhealthy attachment to or comfort with the status quo and an unwillingness to wrestle both with the ideas that something about the present is not right and that Christians should be working for something better.
- "What's necessary is that all Christians unite into one political party or force so we make our voice louder, act with power, and get the results we want." This not only prioritizes political expediency over theological concerns and differences, it also assumes, without evidence or reason, that that "all Christians" will be of the same mind about what results they want and the appropriate way to achieve them. This view also carries the danger that believers might come to identify themselves first as political creatures and only secondarily as the people of God, who are new creations in Christ.
- "Different times require different positions and what matters most is getting the results Christians should want. Therefore we should say whatever most effectively suits the situation, do whatever advances our interests now, and follow wherever the guy we've decided is our leader wants us to go." This approach to politics shares the same errors and dangers of the previous view, but also easily prompts an indifference to godly standards for speech and behavior and an abandonment of biblical principles for God's people; the ends justify whatever means necessary to achieve them (and the ends themselves are, too often, not recognizably Christian).
- "Politics is a dirty and unholy business, full of sin and sinners, so God's people should flee from it, not engage with or participate in it." This idea is sometimes extended so far as to say that since the state is a thing of the world, it is not even proper for believers to work in government in any capacity or at any level.
- "What's going to happen is going to happen. Some things will be good and some will be bad, and nothing I do is going to make any difference." This view is sometimes presented as strong faith— "I'm just trusting God's promises to work everything out for our good"— when in fact it reflects apathy toward the world or a willful ignorance of events and decisions that affect God's people. People with this attitude are often simply rationalizing their disinterest in anything that doesn't immediately affect or interest them as individuals.
- "Scripture is clear that things will get worse and worse for Christians

as the Last Day draws near, so doing anything politically to make things better would just be fighting the inevitable and wasting our time and resources. There's really no point in getting involved or trying to have any influence on what the government does or on things that might happen." Like the previous view, this one takes hold of one scriptural truth and ignores others. It results in inaction—which is not much different from indifference.

- "Jesus gave the people of his church their marching orders before he left the earth: continue his work of making this world a better place, loving others and setting a good example for others to follow. Of course, Christians will be actively involved! Working through politics and the institution of the state is one of the ways we bring heaven down to earth and fulfill his promises of a better world for everyone—but especially for the poor and the oppressed." Though it's unlikely many of the Christians who have such attitudes would use the term, this is in many ways a form of utopianism—just one that uses biblical language and speaks more of love and peace than of leisure, pleasure, and prosperity.

The above are, as mentioned, just examples, though they encompass most of the more common flawed approaches and outlooks Christians have where politics is concerned. There are numerous variations and permutations, as well as other unique views limited to particular times, places, or groups. In some instances, Christians or churches build their philosophy of political participation around a particular doctrinal conviction that itself doesn't directly impact politics—strict pacifism, for instance, will almost always end up either distancing its followers from the state and its business or creating conflict with it.

You may have found yourself, as you read through the list above, easily identifying what was wrong with some views and struggling to see any error in others—or even disagreeing that there's anything wrong with one or more of them. God-willing, this book will make everything clear soon enough, but for now we can sum up by saying that sometimes the flaws are in nature more theological (how the Bible is interpreted or its truths are applied) and sometimes more logical or practical (realities that are overlooked or denied). A failure to appreciate the real-world consequences of some action or inaction might result from any number of all-too-human weaknesses or mistakes, but errors in applying God's Word and wisdom will be of special concern to Christians, who want to always walk in the light with Christ.

So it is good and loving to correct any false or faulty view of politics that fellow believers might hold. In the list above, the first three include improper generalizations: they assume that since they see that God has blessed or at least protected his people in one set of circumstances that those circumstances then should be replicated—as though those are the only conditions under which the Father will bless and protect his children. The next two views in the list make the error of putting trust in people or power when that trust should be put in God, and the rest take scriptural truths and promises out of their proper context and misapply them (often to reach a predetermined or preferred conclusion).

It is outside the scope and purpose of this book to "correct" any Christians' ideas about any specific political issues that they or their nation might currently be dealing with—such as immigration, taxation, health policy, or foreign relations. Instead, its goal is to present the biblical truths that should inform and guide believers, in any country and at any time, who are dealing with political questions—to help as they make their decisions about what is right and what is right for them to do or say. In the process, erroneous or unhelpful approaches to the larger question of how Christians should address the challenges and choices that the unavoidable intersection with politics presents will, it is hoped, be exposed.

Erring Approaches

Still, it is helpful here at the beginning to briefly identify what is wrong or lacking in such incorrect approaches to our topic, both to set the stage for what follows and to illustrate the important and urgent need for a better and biblical approach—the need which this book was written to address. It is not necessary to cite specific examples;[4] the reader may, however, find that he or she is able to associate one or more of the following descriptions with a view they are familiar with.

In theory, the easiest errors to correct are those that involve the use or interpretation of Scripture, since the problem is simply solved by a right use or interpretation. The reality, of course, is that people cling tightly to their ideas and are not so easily convinced. In every age, then,

4. Mentioning specific writers, denominations, traditions and such would likely result in distractions when some disagree about the particulars and others feel drawn to defend something they take as a misrepresentation or personal attack.

well-instructed believers will still have to deal with fellow Christians, even respected leaders and teachers, who advocate approaches to political matters that

- *Really have no basis in the Bible:* They may quote verses or refer to figures from it, but they do not actually construct a theological case for their views or course of action based on anything the Scriptures actually teach. Ultimately all they do is make arguments for ideas they hold for other reasons—cultural, sociological, or economic, or self-serving, prejudiced, or vengeful—and present them with a kind of Christian veneer that unsuspecting, immature, or merely credulous believers don't see beyond.
- *Argue poorly or wrongly from Scripture:* Those who teach or support these approaches to the topic are often quite sincere and serious in thinking that they are interpreting the Bible properly to reach the conclusions about politics that they do but are, unfortunately, mistaken. Perhaps they simply reflect errors that have been taught by generations before them, maybe they think they have discovered some long-forgotten or never-before-understood principles or truths, perhaps they mistakenly think that the little they know is everything there is to know, or maybe they have studied well but simply misinterpreted or misapplied what the Scriptures say. Whatever the reason, they have things wrong even though they have consulted the right source, and their confidence that their approach is entirely biblical makes it that much harder to convince them otherwise.
- *Consciously ignore, minimize, or redefine what Scripture says:* This is more typically the approach of scholars and churches that do not see the Bible as God's authoritative, enduring, and objectively true Word, but can still be found even among Christians who hold to the accuracy and inerrancy of Scripture. For entirely human reasons they determine that what the Lord has said has become irrelevant, that other considerations eclipse his will and wisdom, or that because of their education—or the advances or complexities of the modern world and church—they simply have more knowledge or insight than anything as outdated and oversimplified as the Bible (in their view) might offer.

Other erring approaches to the questions of Christian engagement with politics base their conclusions on a mix of scriptural arguments with various other things—wrong premises, faulty information, limited

understanding, logical fallacies, emotional reasoning, cultural assumptions, and the like. Thus, we see some that

- *Take the church's experience in one nation, culture, or era as a revelation of God's universal will:* Those who take or follow this approach likely don't appreciate that this is what they are doing; they are working within the limits of what they know and are familiar with.[5] Unfortunately, they fail to think beyond that and study or imagine situations in which their rules or advice will be unhelpful, unwise, or even dangerous for Christians.

  Generalizing as to what is proper for or expected of believing citizens based on life in a free and open democracy where the church has always had influence, for instance, is quite likely to produce "principles" and applications that are inappropriate, unsafe, or worse for Christians who live under an authoritarian system or in a country dominated by another religion like Islam or Hinduism. In the same way, it will be problematic to turn to some historical "golden era" in a particular place such as Reformation-Era Germany, fourth century Rome, or colonial America, and presume that what was proper for Christians or the church in those societies must be proper in any nation under any government.
- *Fail to recognize a change in circumstances:* Related to the previous approach, this makes the mistake of assuming that the way things were before is the way they will always be (and, often, should always be), when in fact the position of Christians and the church in society or in relation to the government has changed significantly (and likely won't be changing back). This happens most commonly in nations that at one time were majority Christian (at least nominally) but no longer are—neither the state nor the population respects the church as it once did or shares the values that characterize believers.
- *Fail to account for different situations and systems of government:* This attempt to apply the truths of Scripture to the question of Christian political engagement also suffers from a myopic focus on the familiar. In this case it is the assumption that what "works" or is appropriate in your own country and under its system of government pro-

5. Sometimes, though, there is a more conscious condescension or presumption involved, rooted in things like nationalism or the arrogance and egotism of those who see themselves as more modern or advanced.

vides a general model or ideal for believers everywhere and in every situation, though it doesn't quite call it "doctrine" or "God's will".

A Christian writing in a nation with robust freedoms of speech and religion might, for instance, declare that believers should simply refuse to cooperate with the government in certain circumstances, but under a totalitarian regime such a refusal might have a very different meaning and result. Similarly, conclusions about how believers should engage with politics based on what happens in a nation with a two-party system might not transfer well to one with a multi-party democracy—and not well at all to a one-party state.

- *Follow the culture more than Scripture:* This approach makes one of two assumptions: The first is that any changes in society's values that are called "progress" by the broader culture are things that Christians should accept, applaud, and advocate. The second is that such changes are both evidence that the church has lost the battle for the public square and reasons that it should just "go with the flow"—if, that is, it wants to have any influence at all over politics and society's direction. In either case Christ's call to be salt and light for a sinful world is forgotten; his disciples don't follow the culture but instead seek to influence or lead it away from evil and toward righteousness.
- *Let unscriptural or improper bias(es) influence or guide one's arguments:* This may be done consciously or unconsciously, but can be hard to detect in oneself when the ideas or inclinations are supported by or deeply rooted in the culture.

  An egregious example might be a believer in a western nation internalizing that all the Christians he knows are white and of European descent; interprets that situation not just as "normal" but also as "ideal". He then connects what believers should value and work for politically with what he sees as "white interests". The next step is that he sees any kind of political work on behalf of non-white interests as a threat to his faith and something that good Christian citizens need to join him in fighting against.

Common to many of the erring approaches above is that their advocates and practitioners use a backwards method of biblical interpretation. They don't read the Scriptures to find the relevant truths and general principles and then apply those to the particular situation of believers in their own particular nation. Instead, they draw conclusions based on their unique circumstances, assemble Bible passages to suit those con-

clusions (ignoring any that don't),[6] and then present their conclusions as universally applicable scriptural teaching. In most cases we can assume this is done without malice or calculated intent—blind spots, unconscious biases, or simply not having learned a better way can be blamed for their wrong approach to the Scriptures.

Another common error comes from confusing applications with principles. For example, a Christian thinker living in Democracy A might argue that since biblical teachings and values make the choice clear, believers should fully endorse Policy X and candidates who will carry out that policy. "Christians should support and vote for any candidates who speak in favor of Policy X" might then seem to be a reasonable and useful proposition, yet it is an application of principles unique to those specific circumstances. To present it as an enduring and general principle—a truth that fits every situation and guides all believers—improperly (and inaccurately) binds the consciences of fellow Christians. Such universalization will also eventually cause it to collapse when reality crashes in: When it is applied to the promotion of the same Policy X in different Democracy B and things don't work out as expected, believers might find their faith weakened or tested.

Similarly, when Candidate M makes promises regarding Policy X but otherwise works contrary to the values Christians are called to foster and uphold, this will mean that a vote cast for M is simultaneously a vote for good and a vote for evil, a choice not every believer's conscience is going to be comfortable with. Association with M and his or her less-than-godly reputation might therefore damage the witness of all believers.

Books, articles, sermons, or teachings on Christian engagement with politics can still, however, be unhelpful or misguided in their focus even if they get everything (or most things) right in terms of biblical interpretation, basic theology, and logic. In recent years much has been written, said, and recorded on the topic of "church and state", particularly in response to situations in which believers feel their government has overstepped its bounds and interfered in matters that it should stay out of. It's not necessary here to comment on the correctness or inaccuracy of any of those specific arguments, but one observation should be made: far too often they deal with the question of politics only in regard to the

6. When supporting passages from Scripture are lacking, frequently copious quotations from extra-biblical Christian sources are used as substitutes—respected authors, historic doctrinal statements, etc. Good theology may very well cite such sources, but always as a *supplement* to Scripture (not a substitute for it) —to demonstrate that the conclusions one has reached are not novel, unprecedented, or radical.

church—as organized into institutions or as believing citizens speaking and acting together in alliance—and not the individual Christian.

Sometimes the emphasis is very much academic and theoretical and thus of little use to the person who asks, "Well, what does this mean about how I, as a disciple of Christ, should cast my vote?" At other times the focus seems to be more on questions like, "What can we, as the church, tell the state to do?", "What can the state tell the church to do?", and especially, "What don't we, as the church, have to do when the state tells us to do it?"—questions that are certainly of political interest to concerned Christians, but not the ones they need answered. What believers seek answers to are things like: what to think about an issue, which party to support or join, whether to get personally involved with a cause or campaign, and how upset or happy they should be about some development.

This Book

This book is intended to fill that gap and address the individual Christian—to help him or her deal with the very real and very practical issues and questions that come with living as a citizen of a nation and under its government, while at the same time living for Christ and as a child of God. Both believers who have lost sight of who and what they are when engaging with politics and those who have chosen not to engage (because they lack the necessary knowledge or feel overwhelmed by it all) will benefit from our study here. Thinking things through, making decisions, having confidence, and finding peace are all easier when "politics" is considered within the context of the entire Christian life and mission.

God-willing, this book will also serve as something of an antidote to the kinds of imbalanced politics that some believers engage in or are encouraged to adopt. Far too often Christians who get invested in the political process end up with their focus more on worldly concerns and values than on godly ones: on having and exercising power rather than love and service, on strategy rather than character, on positions rather than mission; on votes rather than hearts, on what to do rather than how it should be done, on victory instead of virtue, and on ends instead of means. This kind of misdirected focus is not spiritually healthy, neither for the individual nor for the church as a whole. The things we will discuss in this book are important and well worth the attention of God's people, but we should all remember that if you take your politics seri-

ously, but not your Christianity, something is and will be very much out of balance in your faith and life.

A big part of this book's remedy for imbalance and imprecision is a focus on *why*—why Christians live, why they live as they do, and why that makes the difference for how they view and engage with politics.[7] The same why explains the seriousness and significance of our topic and the importance believers should place on understanding these truths and their applications—the reason this matters and the reason we want to get this right.

If, therefore, you picked up this book expecting or looking for some kind of Christian blueprint for electoral victory, the secrets to taking control of the state, or a plan to remake a nation into some theocratic ideal, you will be disappointed. This is not a call to arms; if anything, it is a call to the cross,[8]—to faithfulness and sacrifice, not strategy or success. Neither is it a call to a false or forced uniting of Christians into a partisan force based on political expediency or a simple grasping for power and respect; [9] it's a call to individual identity, integrity, and engagement.[10]

At the same time, though, it is an encouragement to Christians not to cede the civil sphere—politics—to those without the Holy Spirit. To do that would be good for neither the church and its people nor their neighbors in their nations. Of course, with that encouragement comes instruction that equips believers with more and better information, both about Scripture's teaching on the topic and about how to apply it to their specific situations, questions, and frustrations. This should also provide a foundation for more fruitful discussion of politics among Christians.

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7. Kudos to you if you guessed that *love* plays a big part in the answers. But it's worth reading on to see just how!
8. Matthew 16:24–26; Mark 8:34–38; Luke 9:23–26.
9. As will be discussed further in Chapter 2, the unity Christians have is spiritual—not political, cultural, sociological, ethnic, etc.—and eternal; it won't be fully experienced and enjoyed until believers are joined together in heaven. Theological unity is something to be worked for here on earth, but it is based on agreement in doctrine, not on expedience or compromise: "Brothers, I am making an appeal to you using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10).
10. To be clear, this does not say anything about individual Christians who might join a political group that shares their concerns and convictions and has reached the same conclusions about what is politically wise or necessary.

Context and Contents

This book has been written during a time of great political unrest, anger, fear, and confusion in the United States of America. While I definitely believe it addresses current concerns and will be helpful to my fellow believers here and now, I have deliberately avoided references to present-day or recent-day conflicts, controversies, personalities, loyalties, and the like for a number of reasons: to guard against any impression of partisanship, to keep the text from becoming quickly dated, and to keep it as accessible and understandable for non-American Christians as for American ones.

I have also excluded quotations from and references to non-biblical sources—doctrinal statements, church fathers, other writers, etc.[11] This was primarily because I wanted the only authority here to be God speaking through his Word. I also wanted to avoid the possibility that readers might come across a quote in support of a point from a particular source and instinctively dismiss that point because they belong to a different denomination, don't trust that scholar, have a bias against that author, or have a similar problem with the source. This book is therefore not an academic work or survey of others' opinions or scholarship; it is simply an attempt to present what Scripture says and apply it to our topic.

"If you take your politics seriously, but not your Christianity, something is and will be very much out of balance in your faith and life."

The material is divided into three sections. Part I (Chapters 1-5) sets the foundation—the basics of our lives, nature, purpose, and character as Christians and how that intersects with the nations we live in. Part II (Chapters 6-14) addresses the things that not only set believers apart from their fellow citizens but also give them advantages when it comes to political engagement. Part III (Chapters 15-18) gets more practical about what that engagement will be and look like—and includes a model to help keep calm when events or ideas might otherwise lead us into fear, worry, or a loss of control.

If you're the kind of reader who strongly prefers a book's chapters to all be roughly the same length, I pray that you are not upset or otherwise troubled by the inconsistency and variation you will encounter in this volume. Some subjects simply require more discussion (and some less).

11. I beg the reader's indulgence for bending this rule in a few footnotes.

I would be particularly disappointed if just reading this book caused you distress. Another of its goals is to give relief to believers who might be suffering from emotional troubles or pains because they're having difficulty as Christians dealing with what's going on politically in their nation or community. Sanity and serenity are good things that God wants for his people; a good foundation in the Scriptures and trust in his power, love, and wisdom will always help provide or preserve those blessings.

Indeed, as the world grows ever closer to its end, believers everywhere will face all sorts of distress. The things that you learn here, I hope, will be encouragement you can offer to other Christians when they are troubled by what they see and hear.

Christ never promised that living as his disciple would be a walk in the park—quite the opposite, in fact: "In this world you are going to have trouble" (John 16:33). But the Lord does provide everything we need on our journey through this world on our way to the next one, and we obtain it not by strenuous labor or seeking but, simply and freely, through faith.

> *Trust in the* Lord *with all your heart,*
> *and do not rely on your own understanding.*
> *In all your ways acknowledge him,*
> *and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5,6)*