



## **Taking Sides: The Christian's Responsibility in Civic Affairs** *Part 1*



*By Kevin Kookogey, Guest Columnist*

This is the first in a series of essays on the duty of Christians in civic affairs, adapted from Kevin's weekly radio address and podcasts at <http://www.advancingchurch.com>

Let's begin by dispelling some myths about Christians and political affairs.

A common misconception lurks among American Christians that politics can be separated from our beliefs, and that the Church – the Body of Christ - should not be engaged in the political arena.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Elections, conventions, and politics are merely practical means for implementing a body of beliefs about the human condition. Every policy advanced, every piece of legislation passed, and every opinion rendered by a court presupposes certain beliefs about the nature and relationship between humanity and government: from *whom and how you tax*, to *whom you choose to defend*, to *what you can say, think, or do*, and *how you spend your money*.

We must, then, reject the notion that human existence can be divided into “political” and “non-political” segments. We are people, after all, and any ideas, policies, or decisions that affect people are inescapably political in nature.

The Bible, of course, has something to say about people and the human condition: who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and our duties. The Bible also has a lot to say about governments, kings, power and authority.

So if politics concerns the affairs of people, and if the Bible has some important things to say about people and governments, what conclusions might we draw from the ongoing effort to discourage the Church from engaging in politics? Might it have something to do with what the Church believes? Indeed, what Scripture has to say about people and governments stands in stark contrast to the spirit of the age. The Word of God, in fact, makes a lot of people very uncomfortable.

We must therefore understand that the push to neutralize the Church or to ban it from political affairs altogether is a deliberate strategy aimed toward keeping the influence of the people of God out of every area of culture

This has been going on since the beginning of time.

And contrary to popular belief, the conflict between the Church and the State is *central* to our faith. It is not relegated only to those with a political interest. Nor is it secondary to caring for the poor or to the vast body of social programs diluting the impact of the modern Church.

Too many Christians forget that Jesus was condemned to death for a political crime. Jesus explained that His kingdom was not of this world, and that all temporal power is subject to the authority of God. For *that* He was deemed a threat, a rebel against the Roman State, leading to the political punishment of crucifixion.

Jesus Christ did not die of cancer or natural causes. Nor was he killed in a chariot accident. He was crucified by the State for a political crime.

That Christ against Caesar – Church v. State – stands at the *center* of the Gospel is further evidenced by the collusion of the Sadducees and Pharisees, who made common cause in an attempt to trick Jesus regarding the subject of payment of taxes. Yet Jesus undid them, telling them to “*render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.*”

Notice that Jesus did not admonish them to give Caesar everything that Caesar *demand*ed. He said to give Caesar what *belongs* to Caesar. This is a critical distinction, because kings and governments always seek domain over more than what is rightfully theirs.

The command that we give to God what belongs to God establishes a clear limitation on Caesar's power. There is no room for interpretation. We must not give to Caesar what is God's.

The manner of Christ's death further illustrates our political duty. When Paul writes that "everyone [is to] be subject to the governing authorities," or when we read that we are to submit to the authority of leaders, whether the emperor or governors, or that we should pray for all those in authority, we must never mistake that as a command to obey *unconditionally*.

Were that true, Jesus Christ died for nothing! Christ could have avoided crucifixion by simply obeying **Romans 13**. Likewise, had Paul obeyed his own counsel, he would have escaped torture and beheading by Nero. And if Peter had complied with his own admonitions, would not he, too, have dodged being hung upside down on a cross for his failure to worship the state cult or the "genius" of Rome?

The suggestion that Scripture supports yielding to authority even when that authority exceeds the bounds established by God is to suggest that the Bible commands that we obey the State above God. Such a reading of Scripture contradicts Christ's own words, while flying in the face of the manner of death of Christ, Paul, Peter, all of the disciples (save for John), and every martyr who over two millennia has died for Christ in the face of demands for absolute loyalty to the State.

The Bible is unambiguous that all authority – including the authority of governments - is derived from God. If governments disobey God, we must disobey them, lest we be subject to punishment for rendering to Caesar what is God's. These truths were understood by St. Augustine. They inspired Jon Knox, Samuel Rutherford, and the authors of our own Declaration of Independence. The Biblical distinction between true law and illegitimate power also served as the moral foundation for the Civil Rights movement as so eloquently captured in Martin Luther King's famous "*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*."

And the conviction that the Church must stand erect as a counter-power to unlawful political power motivated William Wilberforce's fight to abolish the slave trade, while providing the basis for the successful defense of human liberty in Poland and the 1986 Philippine Revolution.

With these foundations, our next essay will begin to explore ten very common questions regarding the role of Christians in political affairs.

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Word Count: 1108