



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

# Should Christians Support Their Governments?

*Exploring the relationship between Christian faith and political authority*

### Render unto Caesar?

In the many generations since Jesus told his followers to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17), Christians have struggled with their relative allegiances to their church and their state. Jesus’ answer to a question about taxation has often left Christians wondering. What belongs to whom? What is my responsibility as a Christian? Should I support my government, and to what extent? We understand ourselves to be first and foremost under the rule of God, and that inevitably creates confusion when we ask about our loyalties to other powers.

The early church, living as it did under the yoke of the Roman Empire, experienced the state both as its most hostile detractor and, later, as its strongest supporter. And at either extreme, as persecutor or as protector, the relationship between church and state was fraught with difficulty. Certainly the earliest years of the church in the Roman Empire exhibited these dangers most obviously. While the Roman state was generally receptive to a wide range of religious traditions, Christianity and Judaism were exceptions. At least

from the days of the emperor Nero forward, Christians lived a perilous existence. Officially outlawed, practitioners of the religion relied on the whims of emperors and their representatives. When the state chose to enforce its laws, extreme persecution was the all-too-common result.

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Living in such a climate taught early Christians the dangers of being estranged from the ruling authorities. Removed from the halls of power with few voices raised in their defense, Christians were left with the choice of either practicing their faith in secret or of embracing martyrdom, dying for the faith. The latter choice enjoyed great prestige from many within the community. The first-century theologian Ignatius made martyrdom one of the pillars of his theological system, and death in the arena became synonymous with purity of faith and strength of conviction.

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1

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The Roman state continued its assault on Christian belief and practice throughout the first and second centuries. The persecutions of the emperor Domitian even found their way, indirectly, into the Bible. John of Patmos, writing from a penal colony where he had been imprisoned for his faith, penned the book of Revelation, which contains some of the most direct challenges to the excesses of state power to be found in Scripture. However, things were slowly changing. Quietly Christianity was making inroads into the ruling classes, sometimes even making its way (in secret, to be sure) into royal families.

Officially everything changed with the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. The depth of Constantine's commitment to the Christian faith is an open question, but the impact of his conversion is not. With the Edict of Milan in 313, Constantine ended the centuries-old persecution of Christians, and the relatively rapid transformation of Christianity from outlawed religion to official religion of the state began.

Within the space of less than a generation, Christianity was able to come out of the shadows of the Colosseum and the forum. With Constantine's official favor, Christianity found itself home to the powerful and mighty. Ornate churches were constructed, liturgical practices became more elaborate, and the days of martyrdom receded into memory. But the newfound patronage of the state brought its own problems. Constantine and the Christian emperors who followed him often used their power to influence and sometimes direct the teachings and practices of the church. While debates about doctrine had once been decided through careful theological deliberation, they might now be brought to a conclusion through imperial decree. And some within the movement felt that with the advent of official sanction, the movement began to lose much of its original commitment to the poor and the powerless. The earliest desert monks, retreating to the hinterlands of Egypt to practice their faith uncorrupted by the hand of the empire, represented an early challenge to the perceived dangers of too much involvement by the state.

In short, the first few centuries of Christianity showed that the relationship between church and state would be a central question for Christian practice within the world. If the state was to be rejected, the possibility of brutal repression might quickly become a reality, and

the ability of the movement to effect its mission in the world might be severely curtailed. If the state was to be embraced, the prophetic voice of Christianity might well be muzzled. The church might become yet another institution supporting the powers that be.

## Answering No: Christ against Culture

The option of rejecting the state outright has had its appeal throughout Christian history. At one time or another, most citizens of any state have found themselves distressed by the actions of their government. Governments can behave in morally repugnant ways, and it can often seem to be the righteous choice to register disgust by withdrawing support. States have the power to make their sins manifest in particularly dangerous ways, so it comes as no surprise that within the Christian tradition, people of faith have often rejected particular governments and their actions.

But what about the idea of secular government in general? Governments are directed by human choices and are prone to human sinfulness. But is the institution of secular government itself so prone to sin that Christians are bound to reject its authority? Certainly Christians throughout history have believed in this manner. From the early monastics to the Anabaptist sectarians of the Protestant Reformation to the antigovernment Christians trying to live apart from the wider culture in the United States today, some Christians have claimed that the secular world and the governments that control it are so corrupt that to live a faithful Christian life demands an outright rejection of the values and institutions of the wider culture.

There is a compelling logic to this type of belief. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his study *Christ and Culture*, called this answer "Christ against culture" and traced its roots to the earliest days of the Christian community. The value of this sort of moral stance against secular culture, including government, is that it highlights the very real differences between the ethics of the world at large and the commands of Jesus Christ. It is, in its way, a prophetic stance, and those who have chosen to follow this road have often evidenced real heroism, paying the cost of their principled rejection of the ethics of the wider world. So the monk who rejected the embrace of Constantine, the Anabaptist who was drowned for his refusal to swear an oath to the government, the twentieth-century parent who chooses to homeschool

her children rather than give them up to a system whose values clash with her own, all can certainly earn our admiration.

For all that Christians can learn from this principled rejection of the world, there are flaws in this position, both ethical and theological. The ethical flaws fall under the heading of a shirking of responsibility. Central to the teachings of Jesus was a call to transform the world. When Jesus teaches his followers to pray for the coming kingdom, he insists that it is to be of earth and not just of heaven. We may gain a personal sense of purity in insulating ourselves from the world, but we also lose the possibility of engaging the world in acts of transformation. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in *The Cost of Discipleship*, understood this to be the principal flaw of monastic withdrawal. We don't fail in our love of Christ, but we may fail in our love of the world and our duty to care for it.

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The theological flaw is that the state, for all its manifest imperfections, has a value and a purpose ordained by God. Numerous theologians, while recognizing the sinful actions of particular states at particular times, have nevertheless asserted that the state as an institution is part of God's design for the ordering of creation. John Calvin, who had personally experienced government persecution because of his faith, nonetheless maintained that governments were a gift from God, designed to protect us from danger and to provide for our need. He writes of government, "It is equally as necessary to [hu]mankind as bread and water, light and air, and far more excellent."<sup>1</sup>

### Answering Yes: Christ of Culture

However, if there is danger in answering the question "Should Christians support their governments?" with a resounding no, there may be equal danger in answering with an unqualified yes. If we probe the history of the Christian church, there are a multitude of examples

of the church too easily embracing the state and endorsing its actions and policies unquestioningly.

As early as Constantine's conversion to Christianity, Christian writers were staking out a position that the state was merely an extension of God's lordship over believers. Eusebius of Caesarea, possibly the first church historian, described Constantine as the end result of God's plan for human history in his *Church History*. He lauds the emperor in extravagant terms, making him seem only slightly less important than Jesus Christ in God's ultimate design. And such unhesitating adulation for the state continues throughout Christian history. The idea of "the divine right of kings" gives extraordinary support to the power of the state in the name of God, claiming that the king's authority is given by God and can be checked only by God.

Of course, answering yes to the question of whether Christians should support their governments doesn't

always take such extremely uncritical forms. H. Richard Niebuhr, again in *Christ and Culture*, presents a more nuanced picture of this type of answer in his discussion of "Christ of culture." Christians who tend to respond in this style see the wider culture around

them as part of God's plan. They don't necessarily give up the possibility of critiquing elements of the wider society that they see as flawed, but they have a generally optimistic view of the progress being made toward the kingdom of God and see government as contributing positively toward it. They tend to associate the government of the time, whether that of an enlightened monarch or that of a working democracy, as doing God's work in the world. As such, they tend to give their support to the government, at times too uncritically.

Again, a thoughtful Christian can find much to support in this attitude. It supports a robust view of God's providence, believing that God is actively at work in God's creation, benevolently directing the flow of history. It allows Christians to be active in the world, joining governments in creating more perfect societies. It creates a space for engagement with the wider culture, which a rejection of the world would prevent. This is a place where Christian activists for social justice, for example, might find a comfortable home.

But again, as with a definitive no, the definitive yes as an answer presents difficulties. If the tendency of “Christ against culture” is to love the world too little, the danger of “Christ of culture” is to love the world too much. Christians who give unqualified support to the governments under which they live may often find themselves accommodating the demands of the gospel to the desires of the culture. And they may find great reward in doing so. In the middle part of the twentieth century, mainline Protestant churches in the United States often found themselves as the owners of a great amount of cultural capital, prestige, and respect. Critics, however, could charge that the cost of such acclaim was a betrayal of certain core Christian values and an attitude too willing to embrace the institutions of the wider culture, including the government, without appropriate critique.

Theologically, tension needs to be maintained between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms, principalities, republics, and democracies of the world. If it is theologically appropriate to claim that governments have a place in God’s plan for creation, it is still necessary to acknowledge them as institutions staffed, run, and administered by flawed human beings. A human government, no matter how positively one may view it, is still a human government. As such, all the weaknesses that bedevil us as individual human beings are bound to find their way, at some point, into the state.

## **Finding a Christian Balance: The Prophetic Church**

If both rejecting the state absolutely and endorsing the state uncritically can, in the long run, be ethically and theologically unsatisfying, how is a Christian to respond? How do we faithfully render unto God that which is God’s while at the same time rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s? Is there a middle ground between yes and no?

A possible answer is to take seriously the role of prophet. It may seem grandiose to take the title of prophet unto ourselves. We are not Amos or Isaiah, and certainly we cannot hope to approach the wisdom of Jesus. But as examples of Christian interaction with secular authority, aren’t these useful models? Able to critique, at times quite harshly, the governments of their times, the Hebrew prophets, among whom we

must place Jesus, found a way to support the idea of a functioning civil authority without slipping into unqualified endorsement. They found, in other words, a language to call a government and a people back to their ordained purposes.

How does a Christian live out a prophetic role? In the contemporary world, what questions might a Christian ask when thinking about his or her government? In light of the need to balance critique and support, several questions appear.

### **1. Is It an Appropriate Christian Response to Reject Secular Authority?**

Christians have done precisely this at times throughout history. In our current political climate, distrust of government is rising for reasons that are understandable. Rhetoric about government has become increasingly hostile. As Christians engage in debates about the role of government we would do well, however, to remember the drawbacks to outright rejection of the world. If we withdraw our support from government altogether, are we being faithful to God’s designs for creation? If we withdraw into our own pockets of Christian discipleship, are we being faithful to our calling to care for the world around us?

### **2. How Partisan Can a Christian Be?**

Any commentator on Washington politics in recent years can be expected at some point to note the increasing partisan divide. As Christians, when we examine our own party loyalties, we might pay attention to the problems inherent in the “Christ of culture” model. Do our traditional allegiances to one party or another tend to calcify into “we’re right; they’re wrong” attitudes? Do we too closely identify our political convictions with the work of God, thereby shutting out appropriate criticism? Do we approach our political convictions with the humility appropriate to a people who acknowledge their own sinfulness?

### **3. Should the Church Be Involved in Politics Anyway?**

In a culture that has maintained as essential the separation between church and state, this might be the most basic question in the debate. If by politics we mean a church endorsing one party or one candidate over

another, the answer is no. Churches in the United States are prohibited by law from such outright endorsement. If, however, we use the word “politics” to refer to working for the common good, for the *body politic*, then again we should think deeply about the responsibilities God has given to us for the ordering and maintaining of God’s creation. Perhaps this will include voting and other forms of civic involvement. It may also include raising Christian voices when we see governments forsaking the responsibilities to which we believe they have been called. It certainly involves being educated about important social issues, discussing among ourselves the appropriate ways to deal with those issues, and working to address those barriers to the kingdom of God that we find in the world around us.

## Conclusion

Negotiating the balance between our loyalty to God and our loyalty to our government will never be sim-

ple. Following the demands of Jesus may force us, at times, to reject the actions of our government and to confront its leaders. Being effective toilers in the job of bringing about the kingdom may sometimes force us to work within government institutions, however much we may sometimes disagree with the men and women who represent those institutions. Being serious students of our own history as Christians can aid us in finding the appropriate path, respecting government without worshiping it, and challenging government without denying its legitimacy.

## Endnote

1. John Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*, ed. John T. McNeill (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 46.

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