

POLITICS AND THE CHURCH

Park Cities Presbyterian Church

Lesson 2

Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical. Rule out the political questions and you cut short the proclamation of God's saving power; you leave people enslaved where they ought to be set free from sin – their own sin and others'

~ Oliver O'Donovan

1. Defining Politics (Again)

a. If politics can be described as the art of living well together, of arranging our common life together in an externally peaceful way, and of seeking the welfare of our communities, then political theology helps us to diagnose and reflect upon the modern conditions in which we exist, and the specific challenges presented therein, but it also offers the church a way to consider how our loves are directed toward God and our neighbours

b. The Church & the Secular: Exploring Romans 13 and Acts 5

i. **The Text:** Romans 13 - 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. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed

ii. **The Claim:**

iii. **The Dilemma:**

1. Scriptural Examples:

- a. Refusal of the Hebrew midwives to obey Pharaoh's command to murder (Exod. 1:15-21)
- b. Daniel's prayer (Dan. 6)
- c. Peter's preaching (Act 5:27-32)
- d. Paul's Refusal to leave his prison cell when ordered (Acts 16:35-40)

2. Historical Examples:

- a. Illegal preaching and assembly
- b. Illegal printing and dissemination of Scripture
- c. Refusal to take oaths
- d. Refusal of military service
- e. Refusal to worship the Emperor
- f. Violation of segregation laws

iv. The Deciding Factor

1. **Acts 5:29** - But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men"
 - a. **Other passages:** Jer. 7:23; John 14:15

v. The governing principle for civil disobedience

vi. The mode of civil disobedience

1. Passive non-cooperation
2. Non-violent resistance
3. Active obstruction and demonstration

2. A Biblical Vision for Political Engagement

a. The Good Samaritan as a Biblical Lens (Luke 10:25-37)

²⁵And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your

neighbor as yourself.”²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii³⁶ and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

- b. In this parable of the Good Samaritan we see a desire for believers to show compassion

‘Jesus’ story about the compassionate Samaritan, rather than narrowing down the definition of neighbor, reshapes the whole issue in two ways: the hated Samaritan becomes included in the category of ‘neighbour’, and the ‘neighbour’ is defined as one who *shows*, rather than *receives* mercy’
(Richard Hays)

- a. What is the point?

‘You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do’ (Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, p. 22)

3. Biblical Habits for Political Engagement

a. Wise Discernment

- i. **Matt. 10:16** – Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves

1. Without innocence, wisdom becomes manipulative and agenda driven; without wisdom, innocence becomes naivety

‘Unintelligent mission is not what Jesus seeks when he sends us out as sheep’ (Bruner)

Wisdom: 'Wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves' (Eugene Peterson)

'Even though the Democratic and Republican Parties are imperfect vehicles for a consistent vision of the common good, we can still make use of them' (Reno)

b. Practice Civility

- i. Civility should not be understood as 'conflict-avoidant "niceness"' (Reno)

'When we have our eyes on higher things, we're able to be more generous about our disagreements about how to address lower things' (Reno)

c. Question and Expose False Reality

d. Displaying Public Courage

'Rightly ordered love is, and should be, the ultimate motive for any act of courage. What makes the courageous person stand firm is not confidence in her power, but love. Without love, all the bravery in the world is mere gritted teeth – or, more darkly, it is idolatrous reliance on human strength to save the day'

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, 'Courage'

'The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him'

Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, Jan. 14, 1991

e. Prepare to Suffer

'Safety is not the inheritance of Jesus's disciples, only witness' (Willie Jennings)

f. Rest in God